

The cover art features a central figure in dark, ornate armor with red highlights, holding a large sword. Behind them, a woman with long dark hair and a blue dress is visible. The background is a stylized cityscape with red energy or blood splatters. The title 'BLACK SUMMONER' is at the bottom in large blue letters, with 'BLACK PIERCES THE SKY' below it. Credits for the author and illustrator are on the right.

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AUTHOR:
DOUFU MAYOI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY:
DaXt
KUROGIN (DIGS)

BLACK SUMMONER

BLACK PIERCES THE SKY



The cover art features a central figure in a dark, ornate suit of armor with red highlights. The figure's face is obscured by a helmet with red visor-like elements. They are holding a large, glowing red sword that extends diagonally across the upper half of the image. In the background, a woman with long, flowing dark hair and a light blue dress is visible, looking towards the armored figure. The scene is set against a backdrop of classical architecture with columns. Red energy or blood-like splatters are scattered throughout the composition, particularly around the sword and the armored figure. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and vibrant reds.

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BLACK SUMMONER

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY
DAIX T. KUROGIN (DIGS)



GERARD

END THIS
CYCLE OF
HATRED.

AND
RESOLVE
THIS

CURSED
BOND!

JILDORA



KELVIN

IRIS

"HAVE YOU
FINISHED YOUR
PRAYERS? I CAN
WAIT MORE IF
YOU'D LIKE?"

**"BOREAS DEATH
SCYTHE!"**

I CREATED A LARGE
SCYTHE OUT OF MY BLACK
STAFF OF DISASTER.

NOW THEN,
THAT'S IT FOR THE
USUAL PREP.



Kelvin Celsius

Summoner who gained powerful skills in exchange for memories of his past life while transmigrating from Japan. Constantly seeking battle with powerful foes.
Alias: Grim Reaper

Kelvin's Companions



Efil

Kelvin's slave and a high elf girl. A perfect maid, her love for her master included.



Sera

A beautiful demon in Kelvin's service. Daughter of the previous Demon Lord. Ignorant and Knowledgeable in equal measure.



Rion Celsius

A hero summoned by Kelvin who became his half-sister. Has a rather skewed view of what it means to be a little sister.



Clotho

The first monster Kelvin ever took on as a Follower. Its Storage and ability to create materials make it a key player!



Melina

Goddess of Reincarnation (currently on leave). Refers to herself as Kelvin's wife. Eats a lot.



Gerard

The dark knight who serves Kelvin. Dotes on Ruka and Rion as if they were his own grandchildren.



Shutola Trycen

Trycen's princess. Currently freeloading at Kelvin's place. Every day is a blast!



Ange

Former Apostle. Now happily enslaved to Kelvin.



Bell Baal

A former apostle. Made up with her older sister, Sera, after a fierce fight. Seems like a typical prodigy, but is actually pretty awkward on the inside.



Sylvia

Delighted she got to reunite with Shutola. Now searching Abyssland for Sister Ellen.



Ema

Relieved she has been reunited with Shutola. Sylvia's adventuring companion. The type to chop things with a greatsword using brute strength.

The Holy Empire of Deramis

A country that worships the Goddess of Reincarnation. Headed by the Pope. Connected to the Rizean Empire on the Western Continent through the Crux Bridge, but is at odds with them.



Colette

The Oracle of Deramis. Summoned the Heroes. Her fanaticism makes her a bit sick in the head.



Kanzaki Touya

A Hero summoned from Japan. Lucky pervert. Dual wields. Very oblivious to signs of affection.



Shiga Setsuna

A Hero summoned from Japan. Serious and diligent. Cleans up the problems that Touya causes.



Mizuoka Nana

A Hero summoned from Japan. Partnered with Mun-chan, a flame dragon. Has a comforting aura.



Kuromiya Miyabi

A Hero summoned from Japan. One quarter Russian. Her thoughts are a complete mystery.

The Apostles of Elearis

An organization that worships Elearis as the Goddess of Reincarnation and schemes to resurrect her and bring her back to this world.



The First Seat: Arbitrator

Real name is Iris Deramilius.

Elearis's proxy. Resurrects those she thinks would be useful as Apostles.



The Fourth Seat: Protector

Real name is Serge Flore.

The previous Hero. Possesses the unique skill Absolute Gospel. Was the one who invited Kelvin's group to Abyssland.



The Third Seat: Creator

Real name is Jildora.

Possesses the unique skill Eternal Return. Has a deep history with Gerard.

The Second Seat: Selector

Real name is unknown.

Only Arbitrator knows his location, but even this info is uncertain.

The Fifth Seat: Analyzer

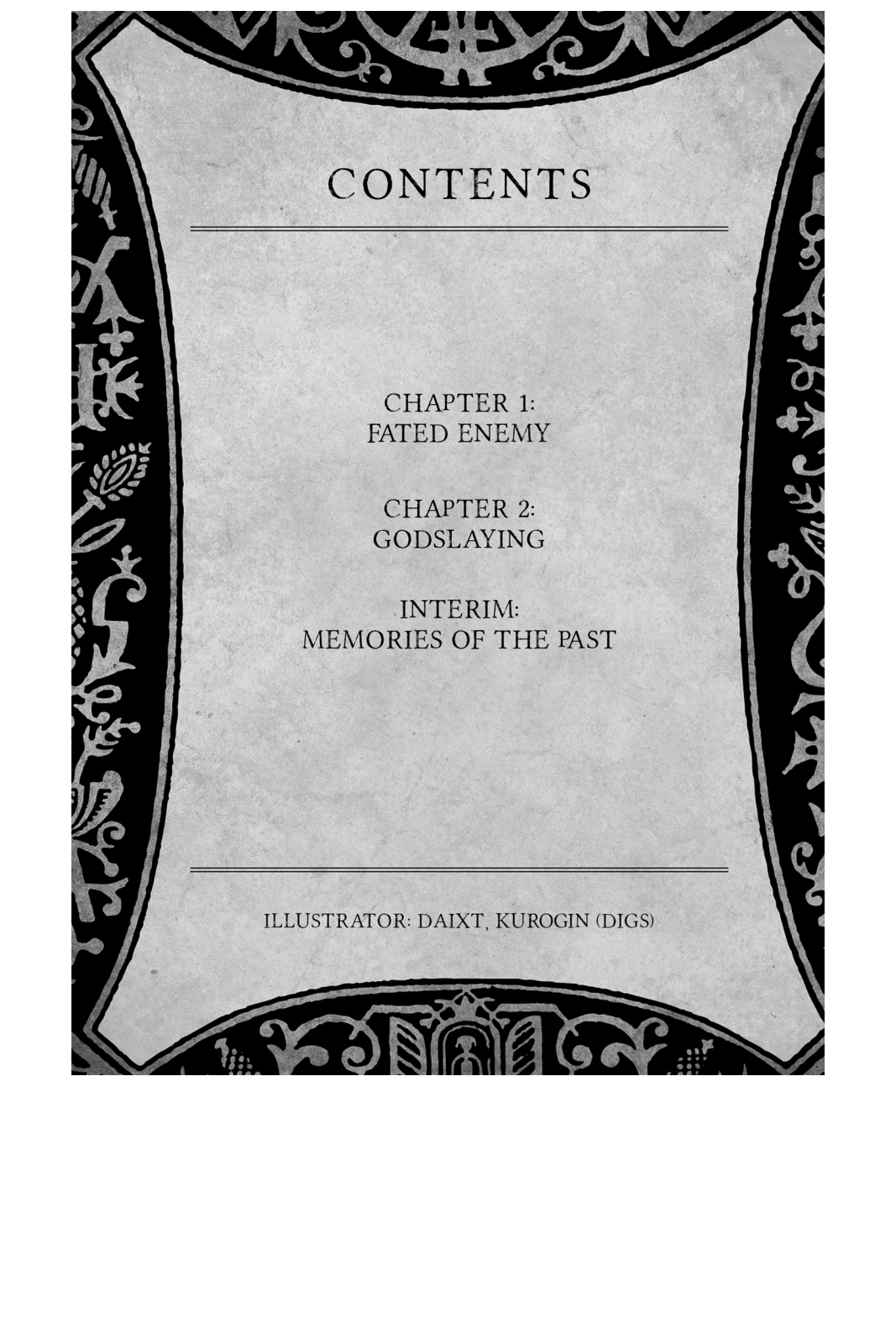
Real name is Riold.

The real identity of former guildmaster Rio. Possesses the unique skill God's Eye.

The Ninth Seat: Survivor

Real name is Nito.

Possesses the unique skill Return From Cold Ashes. Serves as the sanctuary's guide.



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MEMORIES OF THE PAST

ILLUSTRATOR: DAIXT, KUROGIN (DIGS)

Chapter 1: Fated Enemy

If anyone had been present to witness the fight unfolding east of the entrance to the Evil Deity's Heart, they would have been entirely convinced they had time traveled back to the age of mythology—that was how awe-inspiring the creatures in the face-off were. On one side were Zahahka the Divine Dragon, Lenge-Range the Divine Beetle, and Anra the Divine Snake, all deities from yore, led by Tristan Faaze, Controller of the Tenth Seat among the Apostles of Elearis. On the other side were Fire Dragon King Boga and Light Dragon King Mdofarak. And they were not alone.

"It has been a while, General Tristan. This is likely your first time seeing me in this form, but you took good care of me when I was big."

"What a wonderful surprise! I was thinking what a cute child my opponent was, but to think it was Princess Shutola! This humble servant offers his sincerest apologies for not recognizing you immediately."

Shutola had showed up riding on Mdo's back, followed by ten modified black knight golems that used to go by the name of Schwarzstille but had been renamed to Royal Guard. A very generous number of Wind Jail Gems had been embedded in the backs and soles of all the golems, which was how they had kept pace with Mdo and were now hovering in the air.

::Shutola-sama, you didn't have to trouble yourself to back us up. We can take care of things here on our own!:: The words came from Boga quick and fast over the Network, tinged with a trace of disappointment that it wasn't his back that Shutola had chosen to ride on and speaking in hopes that she might consider changing.

Shutola, however, reined him in. ::Hold it. Boga, did you properly think about what order you'll be killing the Divine Beasts in? If you kill the insect and snake first, the dragon that Tristan is riding will become stronger. There's no telling what would happen if the powered-up dragon gets away.::

::You think we would let it get away?:: Mdofarak sounded slightly indignant.

::The possibility isn't zero,:: Shutola fired back. ::As a fact, the two of you never managed to capture Survivor.::

The two Dragon Kings grunted, having been poked in their sore spot.

::Just now, you reported that you're overwhelmingly stronger than the enemy. If that's true, then the smart thing to do is to kill Tristan first, because he's the Summoner controlling all three Divine Beasts. He's probably the Apostle who'd cause us the most trouble later on if we let him slip away::

::But...if we defeat the weakest opponent first, wouldn't brother Kelvin be disappointed in us? Isn't it our group's policy to fight and crush enemies at their full strength?::

::Oh yes, my liege would definitely say that::

::Of course he wouldn't! Dearest brother Kelvin does get a bit silly every once in a while, but he always makes sure he's not indulging in his hobbies at the expense of putting his companions in danger! Either that or there are other extenuating circumstances! Don't misunderstand!::

Trembling a little inside, Boga and Mdo managed a ::Uh, yes, ma'am....::

::So, as I said, we'll prioritize killing Tristan or his dragon. When a Summoner dies, their contract with their Followers is automatically voided. If that happens to Tristan's side, the Divine Pillars' teamwork should break down, and if we handle the situation well, we might even be able to get out of any more fighting. If they're not emotionally attached to Tristan, they won't come after us for revenge. At the very least, when he was in Trycen, he touted human supremacy and was definitely not the type of person to make this kind of effort. In light of everything I said, what we should be doing is clear, right?::

Boga's bewilderment could almost be heard over the Network. ::I mean, I follow your logic, but...it doesn't sit well with me somehow::

::Shutola-sama, are you sure about this? Isn't it a waste to start by taking out the enemy general? I really do think if my liege were here, he would drag the fight out until Tristan started fighting at one hundred percent::

::It's fine! I'm giving you permission to do things this way! When we have Tristan's head, I'll explain things to dearest brother. I'll take responsibility. In the name of Shutola Trycen, I order you to follow my instructions to the letter without question!::

Shutola suddenly raised a hand towards the sky, emanating a queenly aura that brooked no protest. Even though her appearance was that of a child, her dignity was equal to that of someone shouldering the fate of a country. The young Dragon Kings quailed upon being blasted with such intense intimidation at point-blank range.

::Y-Yes, ma'am!:: they both barked.

The conversation so far had taken place entirely through telepathy. As such, in Tristan's eyes, it must have looked like Shutola

was suddenly raising her hand for no reason. However, he too was a Summoner and therefore also had the ability to communicate telepathically. The moment he saw Shutola moving, he instantly issued orders to all his Followers. Lenge-Range and Anra quickly moved in front of him protectively.

::I'll draw away the two in front, so ignore them and charge straight in!::

::U-Understood!::

::Hey, Mdo, has Shutola-sama always been like this?::

::She might be projecting a little bit of sister Sera right now::

::Ah, they do say that children are easily influenced by their parents and sibs—::

::You two, leave the idle chatter for later!::

::MA'AM!::

::MA'AM!::

Shutola manipulated her threads and sent five Royal Guards towards Lenge-Range and five towards Anra while Boga and Mdo farak shot past at top speed. Even while controlling her golems, Shutola kept her eye on Tristan.

“As expected, you’re coming for me first. Princess Shutola, always the one to prioritize efficiency. However, life isn’t fun without playing around a little.” Tristan maintained the smug look on his face as Zahahka sped backwards as fast as it could. He clearly still loved hearing his own voice as much as ever.

Shutola took a moment to hide the small smile about to creep onto her face and replied, “General Tristan, you can never have too many comrades you can truly trust. Given that, making them sacrifice themselves is out of the question; you have to keep them alive to make the most of them. As the saying goes, where there’s life, there’s hope. You’ve really got to cherish them.”

“I...suppose?”

Tristan gave what he thought was a harmless answer to what Shutola said. However, this was a fatal mistake against this opponent.

Okay, got his affirmation. Activate Retributive Persuasion. Disabling his ability to make those on his side kill themselves.

Currently, Shutola was using her Unique Skill Retributive Persuasion to box Tristan in with logic. What she was saying was common sense that anyone would agree with, but because of her ability, the moment someone affirmed what she said, it would become an ironclad rule in their mind that they could never even question, much less go against. As a result, Tristan could no longer order his Divine Beasts to sacrifice themselves, and neither could he use the ruthless strategy of strengthening a Divine Pillar by killing the other two.

Kelvin had said this Unique Skill would be effective in diplomacy to the point of brutality, but it definitely had its usefulness in battle too. After all, the longer an opponent talked with Shutola, the more options they would lose. Someone who had prior knowledge of her skill would be able to take countermeasures, but someone who didn't would be stripped of all courses of action before they knew it, unable to so much as lift a finger while thinking it was the most natural thing in the world. Boga and Mdo, who fully understood what was happening, felt chills run down their spines even though they knew Shutola was on their side.

"Another thing, General Tristan. You are the reason for Trycen's fall, and, though indirectly, practically the person who killed my father. In other words, I am duty bound to kill you to avenge him. If I were here as my older self, I would surely have told you to end your own life. If the citizens knew how you had betrayed our country, they would surely wish for the same. General Tristan, you have committed crimes that you can only atone for by choosing your own death. Don't you agree?"

Tristan stared at Shutola. If he said "yes" now, he would have no choice but to immediately end himself, and he would do so without hesitation. Shutola's words were a vicious weapon that could kill someone who took a single wrong step.

"You're unusually chatty today, Your Highness. Very well! I shall speak from the heart. I do not agree at all! To live is to enjoy—in other words, he who has fun, wins! Rather than lament those who have passed, it makes much more sense to prioritize those still living. You think I, who seek to enjoy my life to the very marrow of my bones, would choose death of my own accord? Now that is a fine joke indeed!"

The man clutched his stomach as if holding back laughter bubbling up from deep within. Shutola had not counted on her move succeeding, but she couldn't help frowning a little at his answer. Then the look on her face turned even frostier at his next words.

"By the way, Your Highness...could it be that you've already gotten your memories back?"

At that moment, Shutola's aura seemed to explode and the battlefield where everything had been moving at high speed mere moments ago seemed to freeze. This sensation was entirely different from mere hostility. It was a rushing wave of negativity colored by such deep disappointment that Boga and Mdo had trouble reconciling it with Shutola's young appearance.

"Oh my, oh my. I thought I was half joking. Did I actually hit the bull's-eye?"

The girl sighed. "You did. I thought I was doing a good job of not

raising dearest bro—not raising Kelvin-san’s suspicions. To think you, of all people, were the first person to notice. I could not be more disappointed in my own incompetence. Or should I praise you instead? You have always had impressive powers of observation, haven’t you, General?”

“I did not expect you to admit it so easily.”

Shutola was no longer speaking with the voice of a young girl but that of a beautiful woman. It had a gloomy tone tinged with disappointment, but it was unmistakably the voice of the general of the Black Ops.

Boga and Mdo were so bewildered that they wanted nothing more than to turn around and look at her face, but they had not forgotten they were in the middle of a fight. If they were to take their eyes off an enemy in the middle of a battle, they would get a severe dressing down from their master.

::Shutola-sama, have you really recovered your memories?!:: Mdo farak asked, using telepathy as a compromise. At least this way, she could communicate instantaneously.

::And why did you stay quiet about it?: Boga added. ::Azgrad was really worried.::

::I’m very sorry. I suppose you could say this is the result of me putting my own feelings first. I shall explain further another time. For now, please focus on the fight. Tristan is not an opponent to be underestimated.::

The princess’s Clip of Camouflage glowed faintly, with the light spreading to envelope her full body. A moment later, she reemerged with the appearance that Tristan had seen often at Castle Trycen, clad in a white designer dress with exquisite gold highlights, emanating grace and elegance. The sight would surely have been burned into the dragons’ eyes if they had been able to turn around.

Not only was she elegant, she also had the awe-inspiring dignity of a queen. After spending so much time with Kelvin’s group, she had grown so much that she had Evolved beyond being a normal human. Her presence was far nobler and more majestic than that of her father, Zel Trycen, had ever been.

She now smiled in response to Tristan. “Well, thanks to you paying me so much attention, I’ve gotten all my preparations in order.”

Just then, Zahahka realized that its huge form was caught in something invisible. It struggled violently in protest but to no avail.

“What’s going on?!” Tristan was caught off guard. Despite being an Apostle, not even he could figure out what had happened.

Shutola had maintained the conversation with him so long not only to limit his actions by using Retributive Persuasion but also to

keep him busy so that he wouldn't notice what she was doing on the side. The reason the Divine Beast he was riding could no longer move was, of course, her magi-threads.

After losing to Vegalzeld of the Four Demonic Generals, Shutola had started looking for things she could do beyond making puppets move on her behalf. One answer she arrived at was magic. Previously, she had poured one hundred percent of her MP into her magic threads. Now, she had instead lowered that percentage and used the MP to alter the properties of her threads as needed. While staying at the Demon Lord Castle, she had received intense training from Melfina, and thanks to her staggeringly high max MP of over 3,000 and incredible acumen for manipulating magi-threads, she had undergone remarkable growth in a very short period of time.



Shutola currently had False Fog cast on her threads. It was a spell that Melfina was also proficient at, creating a fog of illusion that hid a target from sight so well that only those as attuned to mana as herself could see through it. However, even though Shutola had successfully tied down the Divine Dragon without Tristan noticing, she didn't have the strength to immobilize it on her own. She needed help, but of course, she had predicted this would happen and therefore made preparations.

"Every second wasted on a battlefield is time lost that cannot be bought back with gold. And yet you were willing to keep me company. How good-natured you are, General Tristan."

Behind Shutola hovered four golems that had also been concealed by False Fog. Indeed, these were four of the Royal Guards that had charged ahead to keep the Divine Beetle and the Divine Snake at bay earlier. They were pulling hard on the magi-threads entwined around their figures, keeping the Divine Dragon suspended almost like fishermen using a net.

"Are those the golems you seized from Jildora-san? I seem to remember you sending all ten at the start of the fight."

"The fact that you think so tells me you can give your divine Summons orders but can't actually communicate with them."

After Boga and Mdo had begun their pursuit of the Divine Dragon, four Royal Guards had promptly abandoned their fight and circled back around to Shutola. These golems could reach very impressive speeds, making them quite capable at repositioning themselves as needed. Of course, Lenge-Range and Anra had seen them leave. However, the creatures were only being treated as puppets through Tristan's Unique Skill Divine Manipulator. They would fight the Royal Guard coming at them as they had been ordered to, but they wouldn't actually inform Tristan about the ones that slipped away.

"Even if you can make deities obey you through Summoning, you cannot tap into their full strength without forging a proper relationship of trust. This is simply another form of the collars you used back in Trycen."

"Oh, the collars! That sure takes me back. And how it pains me to hear such words from the mouth of one who was held in such great esteem by the people. Trycen is a country founded on the concepts of human supremacy and exploitation of other races. If King Zel were alive to hear you, it would have broken his heart."

"His personality change was due to him becoming a Demon Lord. He had always assumed a neutral position before that. Revising policies that no longer serve their original purpose and taking the time to guide the masses is the primary duty of royalty and nobility. But in

your case, General Tristan, I imagine you think of this duty as nothing more than a pretext to enjoying your life. Further conversation is pointless. You scum—die bound by the evil customs you espouse.”

Shutola waved a hand, signaling Boga and Mdo, who were listening intently with their Breath attacks ready. The Divine Dragon writhed within its bounds and sucked in a huge breath in a desperate attempt to fire off its own attack, but it had no hope of victory against two Dragon Kings.

“Oh dear, I am truly a cornered mouse at the moment. How should I overcome this predicament? Oh, that’s right. I’m a Summoner.” Tristan rubbed his chin in a theatrical gesture, then whirled towards Shutola. “Did you see this coming? Incendiary bug king, come out!”

Magic circles appeared in front of the two Dragon Kings, and out came insects that looked like balloons. Mdo farak’s eyes widened. She recognized these monsters. They were the same species as the beast that had suddenly appeared behind Efil’s back and exploded while she was fighting the general at Castle Trycen. Worse, they had grown larger and looked much more vicious. In all likelihood, they were now capable of much greater destruction. If they went off at such a close distance and triggered the premature explosion of her and Boga’s Breath attacks, things were going to get ugly.

However, Shutola’s expression remained unchanged. “I did see this coming, and I know you cannot make them kill themselves nor set themselves off. To do so would be to go against your creed of keeping comrades alive to make the most of them. Isn’t that right, General?”

“Hm, indeed. Now why did I Summon incendiary bug k—”

Sagittarius and Volcano Formation suddenly swallowed up the bugs, Divine Dragon, and Tristan all at once. As a final protest, Divine Dragon Zahahka unleashed its Divine Breath. However, it never stood a chance. Roaring torrents of energy pulverized its form and reduced it to mere lumps of meat.

Refusing to let even those fragments hit the ground, Boga fired off Volhelm to home in on and blow up every last piece. When the deafening sound of explosions faded, not a single atom of Zahahka remained in the air.

“So much for Tristan.” Boga scoffed. “What an anticlimactic end.”

“Don’t let your guard down,” Mdo warned him. “He didn’t last long at Castle Trycen either. He might be just pretending to have died to catch us unawares.”

“Huh? That’d mean he survived both our Breath attacks! Ain’t no way. We would’ve sensed it for sure.”

“It is not impossible,” Shutola cut in. “Before, General Tristan had a golem Follower with a special ability that he made use of to escape

Kelvin-san's pursuit. If he has found another Follower with a similar ability, he could indeed have slipped away from us the same way. And don't forget about the Divine Pillars he left behind. They are still hostile towards us."

Shutola remained cautious and had Royal Guards keep an eye on their surroundings. Boga and Mdofarak did the same, but not the faintest trace of Tristan's presence remained. They had started off west of the Evil Deity's Heart, but the battle had gradually shifted east such that they were now positioned directly above the hole that served as its entrance. They would have to decrease their altitude in order to be more exhaustive in their search.

"Yep, he's gone," Boga confirmed.

"We want nothing more than for him to have died," Shutola said slowly, "but let us assume the worst and plan accordingly. For now, we have the remaining Divine Pillars to take care of."

Mdofarak looked around. "Are they still fighting your Royal Guards?"

"Yes, they are. I'm buying time by having the golems stay a fixed distance from the Divine Beasts. Since we killed the Divine Dragon, they must have gotten stronger. Let us hurry."

Flames burst from Boga's wings and back as Mdo prepared to launch herself into high-speed flight. To brace against the shock of the sound waves, Shutola copied the stance she had seen her brother Azgrad take while riding dragons and tied herself securely to Mdo with her magi-threads—until a telepathic message suddenly interrupted what she was doing.

::Whoa, now, there's no need for that! Yours truly has just finished off the snake and bug!::

::Huh?::

It was a voice the group had not heard in quite a while. The speaker was someone who had abruptly taken off after leaving them only a letter. As they say, like master, like Follower.

::Sorry for the wait! I, the great Dahak, am back!::

It was none other than the son of the Darkness Dragon King and Kelvin's first disciple, Dahak. He was probably still at the Royal Guards' location and therefore still out of sight.

::Oh, hey, it's the prodigal son.:: Boga laughed. ::Welcome back, man!::

::It's like, how long did it take you?:: Mdo scoffed. ::What a delinquent.::

::That's the first thing you guys say to me? Have you two gotten a bit full of yourselves? First of all, I had no interest in fire or light. That's why I *generously* yielded the titles!::

::Listen to the nonsense he's spouting. I dealt the last blow to the

Light Dragon King because I was faster than the rest of you. That's all there is to it.::

::Same for the Flame Dragon King! More like, you can't even eat meat, Dahak. You couldn't have taken the title even if you wanted to!::

::Hah! You became Dragon Kings but what for? You can't even use your powers properly. You're a disgrace to your titles!::

A charged moment of silence ensued, which was broken by all three roaring, ::You're dead!:: at each other. Apparently, they were so happy about the reunion that they couldn't help themselves. Like puppies, they just wanted to frolic as a way to express that happiness. The problem was, there was no telling what would happen to Abyssland if they were allowed to vent as they pleased.

::Okay, all of you, stop picking fights with someone you can't even see. I have confirmed the deaths of the Divine Pillars with my Royal Guards. For now, let's regroup.::

::Is that...Shutola? What's going on? You sound all grown up now. Did you get your memories back?::

::Pretty much. Follow my Royal Guards; I'll have them lead you to us.::

::Sure thing! Please and thanks!::

Boga watched curiously as Shutola pulled the golems back by retracting the threads coming out of her fingers. The golems slowly but surely picked up pace. A blot appeared in the eastern sky that gradually took the form of several small dots and one big shadow. The former were, in all likelihood, the Royal Guard. That left Dahak as the latter.

"What do y'all think?! This is the new me!"

Dahak's appearance could be summed up by a single word: "darkness." His gigantic silhouette was barely visible against a giant pitch-black cloud that served as a backdrop. This backdrop was large enough to obscure the Royal Guard as well, turning them into nothing more than the occasional gleam when sunlight reflected off their polished armor.

Boga frowned. "Huh? Darkness?"

"Dahak, you became the Darkness Dragon King?" Mdo sounded surprised. "Didn't peg you for someone who values filial piety."

"That's not it, you idiots! This isn't darkness, it's soil! I am the one and only Earth Dragon King, and I'm using Black Loam Scales, a Unique Skill I got when I Evolved! I got the idea for this from my old man. Pretty damn cool, yeah?"

"I-It's wonderful, Dahak. It gives off the smell of nature, and I like it," Shutola said kindly.

Boga blew a raspberry. "The hell? It's not darkness but dirt? That

halves its coolness, man.”

“No wonder I thought it smelled like dirt and cheap.” Mdo nodded. “Now I get it.”

“Okay, Boga and Mdo, line RIGHT up. If you’re picking a fight, I’ll take you on one at a time!”

The floating cloud of black soil began groaning furiously, almost as if it were connected to Dahak’s emotions. If the Royal Guards close to him could have spoken, they would probably have been complaining.

“Um, can you three leave the fighting until after—”

“Dahak, you just shut up and grow your fruits or whatever! You outstanding farmer!”

“It’s too late to placate me with a compliment, Boga. I’m already pissed off!”

“As I said, you three, can we first finish everything before—”

“A dragon who can’t eat meat is a joke! You’re supposed to eat all foods and not be picky! Sister Efil said so!”

“Mdo, you...! Someone whose main staple is dessert doesn’t have the right to lecture me! And bringing sister Efil into this is a cheap shot!”

“I-I can eat other foods too if I put my mind to it. I’m just prioritizing sweet food, that’s all.”

“That’s called being picky, you numbskull!”

The dragons’ argument was showing no signs of abating. When they got this heated, the only people who could stop them were Kelvin, their master; Efil, just because she was Efil; or Sera or Gerard, whose strength they acknowledged.

Shutola slowly inhaled, then shouted, “I SAID, STOP FIGHTING!”

Her voice reverberated throughout the Evil Deity’s Heart. She had returned to her younger appearance for some reason and was in a very huge huff. Mad enough to stomp her foot, even.

“Hey, everyone, were you listening? I said that this isn’t the time to fight. Dearest brother Kelvin and the others are still battling Apostles right now. Did you forget? Are you all dum-dums?”

Despite having reverted her appearance and manner of speech, Shutola retained her queenly aura. In fact, due to being so clearly angry, her aura was even more terrifying than before.

“Um, but that was ’cus the two of them—”

“Are. You. A. Dum-dum?”

“Uh...yes, ma’am. I’m a dum-dum.” The Earth Dragon King had been cowed by a little girl’s anger.

“The same goes for you two, Boga and Mdofarak. I know you’re happy to see Dahak again after all this time, but remember that you’re both Dragon Kings now. You have to act like it! So, once more, I’ll ask:

Are you all dum-dums?!”

Boga lowered his head. “I... I’m sorry...”

“Sorry,” Mdo echoed.

“If you have time to apologize, then go search the vicinity! Move your arms and legs and wings! We don’t have time! If you don’t hurry, I’ll tell on you to dearest sister Efil!”

Three voices cried in unison, “Ma’am, yes, ma’am!” signaling the start of the Dragon Kings’ desperate search.

“We just have to look for that bastard Tristan, right?” Dahak asked. “Easy as pie! Lemme show y’all what I can do after Evolving!” He stopped above the center of the hole and spread his forelimbs.

“What’re you doing, Dahak?” Shutola asked curiously.

“Well, just watch. Now, I can get rid of a miasma like this with no effort at all.”

The black soil surrounding the Earth Dragon King surged down into the hole, vibrating at high frequency. The soil was produced from the scales on Dahak’s wings, and a closer look at him revealed that there was indeed a cloud of fine black powder being blown out with every flap.

“This black stuff doesn’t only look cool,” Dahak explained. “It’s basically Black Loam Scales in powder form, and wherever it lands, I can grow plants that look as lively as the ones I grow on my body. In other words, it’s like fertilizer that revitalizes the land.”

In the blink of an eye, the black soil had covered the entire surface of the giant hole. Despite having spread around so much of it, Dahak didn’t seem tired in the least.

“Wooooow!” Shutola’s eyes sparkled at the fantastical sight as her mind calmly analyzed it, wondering if it worked similar to Sera’s blood.

“Once the soil is ready, next comes seeding. When I was having my race around Abyssland with the old man Earth Dragon King, having our five-round vegetable competition, I gathered a ton of powerful plants and bred them using my Crossbreeding skill! I now have something so much more effective than the purifying plant I used in the Grand Scarlet Canyon; it’s like night and day. It’s even capable of detoxifying the dark matter created by a Rank S adventurer we won’t name who threw sister Efil into despair!”

Shutola blinked. “I’m not sure I get the last reference, but...in other words, it’s incredible?”

“Hell yeah, it’s incredible!” Smiling proudly, Dahak brought his arms up from waist level. As he did so, the miasma cleared up at a visible pace, revealing spots of greenery blooming all along the walls of the large hole. To everyone’s astonishment, the Evil Deity’s Heart, a land so dead that even weeds couldn’t grow, was quickly becoming

covered with all sorts of vegetation.

"This really is incredible!" Shutola gushed. "Are those plants purifying the miasma in the cave?"

"This is the product of breeding Immortal Vegetable, a plant that can grow without even water as long as there are nutrients in the soil, with the most effective detoxifying plants in Abyssland. I swear you can't find anything better either in Abyssland or aboveground."

"This is strange." Mdo frowned. "Dahak's being useful."

"Is Abyssland gonna freeze over tomorrow?" Boga wondered.

"How d— Heh! Keep watching, 'cus I got more!"

Dahak really wanted to snap at Boga and Mdo for their feigned surprise, but he held back, fearful of being yelled at by Shutola again. More importantly, he still had things to do.

"Now, everyone should be able to enter the cave even without a protective barrier. But there are still a ton of creepy crawlies inside. So let's plant some super improved Seeds of Calamity too. They should be able to make easy meals of most Rank S monsters."

Shutola recognized the name. "Are you talking about the carnivorous plant you used in your fight with Goldiana-san?"

"Yep, that's the one. How do I put it? This one, I got memories with. I'm not exaggerating when I say I've poured all my love into it!"

When Dahak thrust his claws into the sky, hundreds of tooth-lined buds burst into bloom, dancing as if expressing the dark dragon's love. Then they got to work crunching, snapping, and gnashing, their gaping mouths and razor-sharp teeth making short work of all the monsters inside the cave.

"I can't believe this. Dahak is practically glowing."

"Is the overworld going to freeze over too?"

"Gosh, you two!" Shutola said crossly. "Mdo, Boga, be more mature! This is the kind of thing you can think but shouldn't say out loud!"

Everyone fell silent. If Dahak were to be honest, Shutola's comment just might have hurt the most, but he managed to recover and continued.

"Last is a plant that's sensitive to the body temperature and presence of living creatures. It's linked to me, which means when there's suspicious activity, I'll know it right away. Uh, I don't think it can pick up someone on the level of sister Sera or Ange, but...you know what I mean."

Dahak clenched a claw and raised it high once again. Many beautiful white flowers that gave an ephemeral impression bloomed one after another. The area around the Evil Deity's Heart was no longer a tainted, dead land. It had been reborn as a completely different place, overflowing with an abundance of greenery and

blossoms.

“All the vegetation and flowers here are species I’ve never seen before!” Shutola exclaimed.

“That’s ‘cus they’re all originals I crossbred,” Dahak announced proudly. “Hmm, there really is no sign of that bastard, Tristan. What’re the chances he beat a retreat into the Apostles’ base? The place brother charged into?”

“The possibility exists,” Shutola conceded. “However, even if we follow him in without a plan, I doubt there’s much we can contribute. It’d be dangerous too, which is why I’m pretty sure dearest brother Kelvin was purposely trying to keep me outside. Hmm...let’s just tell everyone what happened here and remain on the lookout outside the Sanctuary. If any of the Apostles try to escape, we’ll catch them. Dahak, do you have any plants more suitable for defense?”

“Don’t worry! Even if I don’t have exactly what you need, just describe it to me and I can make it on the spot!”

“In that case, start with...”

Deciding to trust Dahak’s confident claim, Shutola began rattling off what she wanted for her strategy. As Dahak took notes, his confidence slowly but surely became replaced by fear, and a cold sweat ran down his back from the ruthlessness of what Shutola was describing.

“That’s about all I want for starters. Are you sure you can make it?”

“Uh, suuuuure. Of course. I’m a Dragon King now, so definitely. Yeah, easy.” Apparently, it wouldn’t be easy. “Well, y’know. As a Dragon King, it only makes sense that I make a nest for myself. So to start, I’ll perfectly create everything you asked for and alter this place to my liking. Forget Abyssland, this is now Dahakland!” By now, Dahak had no idea what he was saying.

Mdo nodded with satisfaction. “What a relief, he’s back to his usual self.”

“His naming sense is still a train wreck,” Boga added.

“One hundred percent,” Mdo agreed.

Shutola looked at the two snickering Dragon Kings. “What’re you doing? I have jobs for you too.”

Pained croaks of surprise came from their throats. Then, under Shutola’s proverbial whip, the Dragon Kings made quick work of reforming the Evil Deity’s Heart.



Looks like Shutola’s group is up to something fun, Sera thought after reading the last page of the report that Shutola had uploaded to the Network. Sera had wiped out all the forces south of the Evil Deity’s

Heart and then strolled into the Sanctuary, but she had then found herself teleported to what turned out to be a massive labyrinth. Ever since, she had been running around looking for the exit. The walls were all white and looked the same, so she was starting to get a bit bored.

Another fork...

Sera had already made the same decision dozens of times over. She was sick of doing so but couldn't very well not do it. Using her innate powers of detection and luck, she picked the correct answer again as a matter of course. However, even though she was going the right way, she still had no idea where she was heading.

I feel like I'm almost there, but it's hard to tell distance in this place. Hmm, is there a barrier here that's messing with my senses? How troublesome.

Despite her complaints, Sera continued running. The fact that there was literally nothing she could do but run made it that much more frustrating.

"I think I'm about ready to leave this place behind," she sighed. "Flashy battle, come to meee..."

"I couldn't agree more," a voice replied almost instinctively. "I'm supposed to be more familiar with this place than anyone and even I'm lost. This is just embarrassing."

Ange, who should have been with Kelvin, came into view up ahead. The two immediately stopped in their tracks and looked at each other in surprise. This reunion was unexpected, to put it mildly.

"Ange!" Sera exclaimed. "What's wrong? You got lost?"

"Ugh! You heard me? Yes, I am." Ange looked down and scratched her flushed cheek. "It seems like this barrier is interfering with my detection abilities. The layout of the passages has also been changed from how I remember them."

"Ah, no wonder I felt like I was off my game. But hey, I met you. So in a way, I was going the right way!"

"You sure are filled with confidence. Hm, the way we should go is..."

The two had been running towards each other, with the location where they met up happening to be an intersection. If they ruled out the two directions they had come from, that left only two. They turned towards the same one without hesitation, as if they had talked it out beforehand.

"My intuition is telling me it's this way!"

"Yep, I agree!"

The two had identified the correct route, Sera through her intuition and Ange by bolstering her weakened detection skills as much as possible. They resumed running and ran and ran and ran.

“I still can’t gauge distance well in here,” Sera grumbled. “It’s really hard to see when the walls are wavering like mirages!”

“I’m pretty sure this is Arbitrator’s doing. Normally, it’s not this bad. Are you able to go faster, Sera-san?”

“A race? Are we racing?! Heh heh, just because you’re confident in your speed, I’m not gonna make it easy for you! I once raced Rion and Melfina and did pretty well! Uh, I can’t remember what we said the prize was. It was something related to Kelvin, I think...”

“Aha ha, if we get serious here, I feel like things will get really out of hand. But still, if we were to race for real, I’m confident I’d win, hands down!”

“I can’t back down after hearing that. I suppose it is time to get serious!”

Sera took a huge step as Ange lowered herself into a sprinting crouch. The prickly atmosphere unique to the moment right before the start of a race filled the air like the calm before a storm. Then the two noticed something up ahead. It was a sign that read, “Don’t run in the hallways. Stay quiet in the hallways.”

Sera’s eyes widened. “Wh-What?! How can that be?! That means we can’t have our race!”

Ange turned to look at her. “Uh, Sera-san, are you serious?” The reminder of how conscientious her companion was surprised her a little.

“What a foul trap! Anyone would hesitate being scolded for their manners in a place like this! And more than anything, it’d make me feel like I’m doing something bad!”

“I’m...not sure I’d call it a trap. What I do know is that if this is here, it means we might be close to Analyzer’s room. As in, Riold.”

“Huh? How do you figure?”

“He’s a bit of a stickler for this kinda stuff. He put up the same sign near his room when he was at the Parthian Adventurer’s Guild. He also really hated Bell and Estoria’s arguments and Creator’s noisy golems. That’s why I’m thinking his room might be around here.”

“Does that mean this sign is for you, Ange?”

“I purposely run without making noise, so...I’m pretty sure this is for Bell. Yep! It’s gotta be. She blasts wind around and everything, after all!”

“Well, if you say so. Either way, we can ignore the trap, right?”

The two walked past the sign, then started running again, telling themselves it was an emergency. Eventually, they reached a passage lined with doors on both sides and stretching so far into the distance that it was impossible to make out the other end. All the doors looked identical.

“Wow, what an obvious trap.” Ange whistled softly.

“You mean, if we choose the wrong room, it’ll go boom?”

“Maybe, or maybe something other than an explosion. Either way, I think it’s safe to say a trap of some sort would be triggered. It looks like this is a challenge to me, former Assassin of the Eighth Seat. Okay, I’ll accept. I’m going to use Uncontainable to phase through the doors. Until I find the right one, be careful—”

“This one seems suspicious!” Sera grabbed the knob of the third door and opened it with a bang. There was no hesitation in her eyes, and she had moved so fast, Ange had no time to stop her. It had completely slipped Ange’s mind that her companion was someone who acted entirely on intuition.

“S-Sera-san?! I said to be careful!”

“Oh? This looks like it’s someone’s room.”

“Huh?”

Sera had apparently chosen the correct door. This was another instance that proved why members of the Baal family were so quick to act on their hunches.

Ange poked her head in, confirming for herself that the room was indeed laid out like someone’s private quarters. There was a work desk in the back and shelves of documents lined the walls. In fact, she was very familiar with this room.

“This is the guildmaster’s room in the Parthian Adventurer’s Guild. Everything’s in the exact same place, from the desk to the shelves.”

“That means it’s Riold’s, I assume? Hmm...now that you mention it, I feel like I’ve seen it before!”

“Very likely, yes. Can you wait a bit? I’ll go in first to make sure there aren’t any traps.”

Considering how fussy Riold was about things, Ange could definitely see him styling his room after the office he had spent so long in. Either that or he had styled his office after this room.

I guess it doesn’t matter which it is after all this time.

Ange shook her head to clear her thoughts, then stepped inside, carefully sweeping the space for traps. After checking almost everywhere she could using Uncontainable, she determined that the place was indeed safe and invited Sera in.

“We found the room of one of the Apostles, but the man himself isn’t here. What a pity!”

“Arbitrator sometimes sent us out on missions, so I almost never saw all the Apostles in Sanctuary at the same time. Let’s think of this as an opportunity. We can take advantage of the fact that he’s not here to search the room for important information.”

“Treasure hunting! Hmm...if the layout of this room is the same as his office in the guild, wouldn’t it make sense for him to keep

important things in the same place?”

“Sera-san, you’re brilliant!” Ange went to the desk and checked the second drawer from the top, where she recalled Guildmaster Rio had kept his most confidential documents. She sighed. “And just like at the guild, the drawer is locked.”

All the drawers had keyholes. Of course, they were not simple locks, and the desk itself was as tough as a safe. The material it was made of emanated the same aura as Nito’s scabbard.

“It looks like we’ll need Riold’s Holy Key to open this lock,” Ange murmured. “Picking it definitely won’t be easy.”

“Want me to destroy the desk?” Sera offered.

“Nah. Because locks mean nothing to me. I can just do this.” Ange phased her right hand straight into the drawer and materialized only her fingertips inside. She got a firm grasp on what was inside, then phased everything back out. “Here we go.”

“Every time I see you using that ability, I can’t help thinking how overpowered it is.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from. Ahem. So, we have here...a book. Was he so diligent that he wrote a journal or something?”

Ange placed the book on the desk and started flipping through it. She had guessed correctly; it was indeed Riold’s journal. She was used to doing this due to the nature of her previous profession, but Sera was getting antsy with guilt.

Soon, however, that restlessness was replaced by a different emotion.

The two gasped softly. “It’s...”



“Heave...ho!”

Gerard kicked down the steel door before him with a deafening crash. Right behind him stood Efil, who was holding Penumbra ablaze. The two earliest members of the Celsius family had encountered each other within the Sanctuary barrier like Sera and Ange had. In contrast to the two girls, however, these two were proceeding not on intuition but by way of brute force. They smashed and bombed anything they thought suspicious, forging their own path in a very bold and brazen manner.

“Hmm, another miss. It’s a dead end.”

“If so, let us destroy more walls. If we continue doing that, we might overstrain the barrier and cause it to warp.”

“Uh, are you sure about this?”

“One hundred percent. Our top priority is to stay by Master’s side. Now that we are unable to contact him, our best course of action is to

go to him ourselves. Come, let us destroy more walls!”

Efil was normally quite gentle and demure, but when it came to Kelvin, she had a tendency to get somewhat out of hand. Their current situation was one such occasion. Gerard, however, was the kind of grandfather who couldn't say no when a grandchild was dead set on doing something. Thus, the two had been continuously wreaking havoc this whole time.

I have a feeling this method isn't the right way to escape this place, though. I understand Efil's desperation to regroup with my king, but maybe it's time we start exploring other options...

Several mercilessly destroyed walls later, Gerard was just about to say something when the situation changed.

“Gerard-san, we've found a large room.”

“Uh...seriously?”

It rarely came up, but Efil possessed Divine Restitution, a skill that gave her a rather significant Luck boost. And Luck was very much a factor in reaching the right place in situations like this, where Efil was trying to brute force her way into something.

“Hmm, you're right; this is quite a spacious area. The air also seems different here.”

“So it is. In the labyrinth just now, the air was charged with magic. Here, the air is filled with the mechanical smells of iron and oil. Medicines too, it seems.”

Gerard and Efil peered inside and realized they had opened up a hole high up near the ceiling of a large, dimly lit room. Within were rows of glass cases filled with green liquid and machines of unknown purpose scattered all around. The scene was clearly out of place in this world.

“In any case, there's little doubt this is an important facility,” Gerard observed.

Efil nodded. “I think so too. Let us destroy it.”

“I'm sorry, what?” Powerful warrior though Gerard may have been, he was aware that he was well advanced in years. As such, his first reaction was to doubt his own ears. *Goodness, I think I'm becoming hard of hearing lately...* “Efil, lass, what did you just say?”

“Let us destroy this place.”

“HUH?! Isn't that a bit too rash?!”

“Incendiary—”

Before Gerard could stop her, Efil's arrow was already glowing white-hot.

“Insolent intruders, kindly refrain from your rude behavior,” a voice said from the darkness, accompanied by something flying very fast.

Efil and Gerard promptly leaped down from the hole to evade it,

after which a massive explosion went off near their previous position. Judging by the strength of the explosion and the direction it had come from, its shock waves must have thoroughly pounded the passage beyond too. If the maid and knight had made the wrong call and backed off instead, they would have taken no small amount of damage.

“So then, dear intruders, what business do you have at my laboratory?”

A man wearing a white lab coat emerged from the darkness. In one hand, he was holding a strange sword whose blade was attached to a tube that was giving off a wisp of white smoke. It seemed clear that this was what had been used to launch the attack just now. The sword had a strange form unfamiliar to this world, but if either Kelvin or Rion had been present, they would have immediately recognized it as a gunblade.

The most attention-grabbing detail, however, was the man’s face. This was Efil’s first time seeing it, but Gerard recognized its general features. It was only a matter of course that he did, as it bore great similarity to that of Dan D’Alba, the man he had once faced in one-on-one combat and had become fast friends with.

“Are you perhaps Jin D’Alba?” the knight asked with trepidation. Even though he and Efil understood that the person inside might differ from the outside, he couldn’t help but ask in an attempt to confirm the body’s identity. Depending on the answer he got, he might have to break bad news to Dan at a later date.

“We are short on time, so I shall give you the answers you seek. The owner of this body was Jin D’Alba, lieutenant general of the Steel Knight Order, though I am Jildora. You are Gerard Fragarach, knight of the fallen country of Alcahl. And you are Efil, daughter of Rumil and yours truly. Knowing this, there is only one thing for you two to do, yes?”



Efil and Gerard felt as if Jildora had seen right into their minds. His words gave them no small amount of shock.

“You... How do you know my name? My family name, even!”

“I am bewildered as well. How can you be my father?”

“I said we don’t have time and yet you still ask questions. No matter; I shall answer them.” Jildora sighed, then fixed his gaze on the intruders. “In your case, Gerard, I simply recognized your voice. It was merely a matter of accessing a memory. I recall the captain of a backwater knight order proudly telling stories of his past exploits in a tavern in Alcahl. As long as I have the right keywords, I can restore the memory to be as fresh as the day it was made. You particularly piqued my interest with how desperately you struggled till the end. You eventually passed with the lifeless body of your daughter in your arms, did you not?”

“You lowlife!”

“Hmph. Next, you want to know why I wiped Alcahl from the map, yes? Ask me and I may deign to answer.”

“There’s no need! My heart is now set on ending your life!”

The rage emanating from Gerard climbed higher and higher. Efil made no move to calm him. She couldn’t—not when she was feeling just as angry as he was.

“Before the crazed dog loses control and comes for me, let me also talk about the elf girl. How much you know about your mother is none of my concern. What I do know is that your current appearance is a dead ringer for Rumil. When we fought in Trycen, I became certain that you are my daughter.”

The topic shifted from Gerard to Efil as Jildora brought up Blue Rage, the large blue golem he had piloted during the war in Trycen.

“A while ago, I needed blood from a Dragon King for an experiment, and the Flame Dragon King, who honestly wasn’t all that bright, happened to be on hand. So I spun a little scheme to get some blood from him. That enraged him, however, and he incinerated an entire forest in the vicinity where the elves lived...perhaps because I had the appearance of an elf at the time. How short-tempered, right?”

“We have already granted the Flame Dragon King his just punishment.”

“I see. Did that make you feel better? Not that I care.”

Efil glared at him in silence.

“Rumil was the sacrifice that the elves offered to the Flame Dragon King to pacify his anger. She was kidnapped and brought to his nest. Knowing that he was after me, I was observing him. But then the idea for an experiment came to me. There is a White Magic spell that converts curses into blessings, you see. So I theorized that if it

were possible to mass-produce those born with terrible curses, it would be possible to turn them into powerful assets.”

Jin’s—no, Jildora’s lips curled in a repulsive smirk.

“I did all I could to create a child born shouldering the full brunt of the Dragon King’s resentment. I purposely let myself almost die—I was an elf at the time—then shifted into the body of a human with fire resistance, which I had prepared ahead of time. When the Dragon King discovered my dead elven body, he basked in the afterglow of satisfaction for quite a while. During that time, I snuck into his nest in my new form and stole Rumil away. Need I explain further?”

“You... No.”

“Have you ever given thought to why you are a half-elf? Your race means you were born from an elf and a human. Once the child was here, I had no more need for the mother. So I sent her back to the Flame Dragon King with thanks. I have no idea what happened to her after that, and once I realized how much it would cost to raise the cursed child, I remember discarding her somewhere conven—”

An explosion rocked the space, caused by Jildora shooting down the arrow that Efil had fired.

“You do not need to explain any further. What’s more, you are not my father. I am no longer a half-elf—I have become a high elf by discarding the blood of my father!”

“Is that so? Interesting.”

Efil nocked her bow and fired a Blaze Arrow, but Jildora merely lifted his gunsword and shot down her scorching projectile with a blazing red bullet. The clash resulted in another explosion that shook the laboratory once again.

::It seems that tube ejects bullets of magic at high speed. The fact that he fired after I shot my arrow indicates he can do so with almost no delay. We are also evenly matched in strength. As such, I will imbue all my arrows with Blue Flame going forward. Gerard-san, please be careful not to get hit by the sparks::

::I’m wearing Crimson Rogalia, the mantle you made for me using the previous Flame Dragon King’s scales! Don’t worry about me, and go all out!::

::Understood::

The flames on Penumbra changed from red to blue as Efil poured all her MP into the bow. The tips of the arrows she nocked became enveloped in highly concentrated MP that flared azure and verdure.

“A very impressive amount of magic you’re handling there. What’s more, you have the grit to not care about destroying yourself with your own flames... Ah, no, this is a strategy you are uniquely capable of employing thanks to the Blessing of the Flame Dragon King. Truly interesting.”

“You think you have time to slowly analyze what she’s doing?!” Gerard roared, having already closed in on Jildora. Demonic Sword Dainsleif was on the verge of releasing all the magic it had absorbed and stored to date, its blade thrumming with such overwhelming power that it was as if this were the only moment, the only strike, it had been forged for.

However, Jildora made no move to block with his weapon. Instead, he merely smirked. “Of course I do. This is my laboratory. I finished making preparations to welcome guests long ago.”

Two unbelievably giant shapes emerged from behind him. They boasted such size, Gerard had to crane his head to look up at them.

::Hmm, they’re on par with the golem we fought in Trycen::

This was why the room was so incredibly spacious—so that there was enough space to store massive golems and for them to move around in.

The first steps they took shook the ground, and the second steps revealed their full forms. The design of their armor made them more apt to be called mechanical soldiers than golems. One was the same metallic blue color as Blue Rage and had four legs and a humanoid upper body. Its appearance was what was normally known as a centaur. In its right hand was a giant lance that would bring a tower to mind, while in its left hand was a firm and sturdy shield.

The other golem was gray and humanoid. It, too, was huge but appeared slim compared to Blue Rage. This one wasn’t holding any weapons, but its right arm was disproportionately large, and it had winglike appendages on its back.

“These two are Cyan Rain and Dezes Gray, state-of-the-art golems that I created with all the otherworldly knowledge I’ve gained, all the techniques I’ve accumulated, and all the data I’ve gathered on prototypes such as Blue Rage. Gerard, you took good care of a few of my creations back when you were alive, even though they were hardly worthy of being called golems. Here is my thanks.”

The two machines moved at the same time. The centaur bent its legs and, in sharp contrast to its slow, plodding steps from a moment before, shot forward in one powerful leap that brought it immediately before the intruders.

“Hrnh!” Upon being effectively run down by charging cavalry, Gerard instantly lifted his shield, Dreadnought Legalus. He didn’t even have time to activate its ability to reflect physical attacks and had to resort to relying purely on his own physical capabilities. He left deep ruts in the ground, barely managing to fend off the first pass as Cyan Rain rushed past.

::Efil, the large one’s heading your way!::

::I see it. Heads up!::

Right after dealing with Cyan Rain, Gerard looked up and found Dezes Gray diving at him. White particles trailed in its wake as it shot forward at high speed with smooth movements. In a display of impressive maneuverability, it dodged all the flying slashes and fiery arrows that Gerard and Efil threw its way with the bare minimum of movement. The sight bore great similarity to the previous Flame Dragon King's flying ability, but the unerring precision was far from that of a living creature.

At the same time, Efil attacked Cyan Rain with her arrows. The huge golem charged towards her, taking the barrage of attacks with its shield as it trampled the lab's creepy glass cases filled with that strange liquid.

Suddenly, a multicolored explosion went off before the centaur's eyes. His shield was made of the same material that Jildora had forged Nito's shield with. It was so tough, it wouldn't bend when hammered and it wouldn't get scratched when slashed. However, it was by no means indestructible. As proof, Jildora had given the shield its current shape. Efil's arrow, lit with fire packed with her magic and strengthened with her mother's Magical Jewel Hair Clip, blew off Cyan Rain's arm, shield and all.

::I've pulverized its left arm, but unfortunately, it was not enough to incapacitate it completely::

::Getting confirmation that we can even damage it is worthy of a medal! Its other arm should be made of the same material!::

After loosing an arrow, Efil generated a Melting Pyrohydra and leaped onto its head. She took up position near the ceiling so she could get a bird's-eye view of the entire battlefield with those green eyes of hers that could see a thousand kilometers and beyond. Part of it was also to stay outside the reach of Cyan Rain with its large lance, but her top priority was to keep an eye on Jildora to catch even his every movement. While paying attention to all their enemies, she constantly fed Gerard updates on the situation through the Network. This way, Gerard knew what was happening both in and out of his field of view.

Even now, Jildora was leaving all the fighting to his two machines and showed no intention of pointing his gunsword at either Efil or Gerard. The look on his face was that of a scientist observing an important experiment. At the same time, his lips were moving as if he was mumbling something to himself.

"With Efil's flames...could destroy...a different process..."

A mechanical whir sounded above Efil's head. She looked up in time to see the ceiling of the lab split open, revealing another space beyond. Immediately, waterdrops began falling on her face.

::Is this...rain?::

In an instant, the rain turned into a deluge. Like a waterfall, the downpour shrank the range of her vision, making it impossible for her to see beyond her hands.

::Oh no!::

The worst part about this situation for Efil was not that the water weakened her flames, but that while it obscured her sight, her own burning flames served as a beacon that betrayed her location.

::Efil! The light from the wings of the bird golem is heading your way! I'll send you the locat— The horse one is coming for me!::

::Thank you! I've destroyed its shield, but don't let your guard down!::

The clashing of swords and the booming of explosions reverberated again and again in the room with zero visibility. After changing opponents, the fight resumed with both sides taking and losing ground in turn.

Jildora murmured under his breath, "Now then, the water's nearly covered the ground. Being able to fight on even footing with my best golems is worthy of commendation. However, Gerard, you can't afford to waste too much time."

The water continued pouring down, burying his words and turning the situation increasingly against Efil. Her arrows grew weaker, and even though she couldn't see well, Dezes Gray's mobility showed no signs of flagging. Rather, Efil felt like the golem was getting even faster. In fact, it had the ability to maneuver in any medium, be it land, air, or sea. Not only was it unimpeded, the golem could even expel the water from its back to gain more speed.

The seven Pyrohydra heads enveloped in blue flame did their best to chase Dezes Gray, but under the circumstances, the golem was the one running circles around them. At the same time, Efil was having trouble landing her arrows. A good hit could deal as much damage as the one that had taken off Cyan Rain's arm, but the problem was getting a hit. As someone who normally landed every one of her shots, the fact that she was failing to do so now—against such a huge target, no less—was incredibly frustrating.

Of course, Dezes Gray was not just on the receiving end. It had a slim body, but it proved more than a threat as it repeatedly made passes with its enlarged arm and godlike speed. When Efil was alone, she could spot the glimmer in the rain and dodge in time, but the same couldn't be said of Pyrohydra. It also tried to get out of the arm's way but failed due to its large size and was reduced to wisps of flame that quickly dispersed. It had tried melting the arm before it landed, but the appendage was coated in water from the deluge, and the effort ended in vain.

This is the worst opponent for me. In order to destroy it, I need to land

a Melting Blaze Arrow with pinpoint accuracy, which requires that I first do something about this rain.

Efil racked her brain while jumping to the head of another Pyrohydra and creating new ones to replace the ones that had been done in. Dezes Gray adopted a new strategy in response while circling in the air. It gathered the particles of light coming from its wings into a giant blade and several glowing spheres that followed closely behind its back.

“Milliard Burning Birds.”

Efil created thousands of birds of fire. Despite their overwhelming number, they could barely maintain their form in the rain. It was impossible for them to deal much direct damage. As sources of light, however, they were effective in obfuscating her position. And just as she’d hoped, Dezes Gray, who had been able to make a beeline for Efil until then, shot off in the wrong direction for the first time.

Its strategy is to cut through everything in its way using its propulsion and that sword of light. Those orbs are magical attacks. They’re accurately shooting down my birds of fire.

If Kelvin or Rion had been here, they would have gotten excited about the similarity between the orbs and a certain add-on in a famous shooting game. But Efil didn’t see it like that and thought of them as nothing more than super accurate cannons. As a result, they didn’t draw her in the same way.

This is where everything starts.

Efil aimed her bow at the ceiling. Large wings of flame spread open and bared fangs at the falling water as if trying to put it back. Just in case, Efil warned Gerard, who was still fighting Cyan Rain. Mere rubble shouldn’t be able to put even a dent in his armor, but being conscientious about such matters was part of her pride as a maid.

::Gerard-san, watch out for falling debris. I will now proceed to destroy this rain.::

::You’ll what?!::

“I serve with my heart and soul!”

A whoosh so clean and beautiful that it wouldn’t raise anyone’s suspicion until the very last instant sounded as Efil fired her next arrow. Several beats later, an explosion loud enough to make those present instinctively cover their ears filled the air. After a small delay, secondary explosions of blue flame went off on either side of the bow as there was a reaction so blinding that it put the combined brilliance of thousands of Milliard Birds to shame.

This revealed her position to Dezes Gray once again, but it was too late. The ceiling collapsed like a dam breaking, and water crashed down. It was no longer a deluge but a tsunami. Efil was somewhat

taken by surprise, as that wasn't quite what she had expected. However, the ability to react with flexibility was a requirement of being a head maid.

“Melting Flame Rampart!”

Astonishingly, her wall of fire surrounded the spreading water and began pushing it back up. The massive amount of liquid evaporated upon contact with the flames, converted into steam. Not only were the flames not extinguished, but the wall of fire continued to push higher and higher until it took the place of the missing ceiling. It was an impressive display of brute force and of the ultimate weapon so treasured by her beloved master and the members of his family.

::I found a way to deal with the water thanks to Master. I couldn't be more thankful::

::Efil, falling rubble! There's still rubble falling everywhere!::

There was no time to breathe a sigh of relief as pieces of the shattered ceiling started raining down through the barrier of fire. All the debris had lit up with blue flames, giving it the appearance of falling meteors. This barrage threatened both Gerard on the ground and Efil in the air.

::Yes, this is a good environment,:: Efil noted with satisfaction.

::It's disastrous for me!:: Gerard protested.

The fire burning the rubble had originally been Efil's flames, which meant it was friendly. Or at least, that was the way she saw it, being a bit loose with her interpretation. With the rain gone, the burning birds and Pyrohydra regained their strength and mobility. Dezes Gray no longer had its boost from water propulsion, and the tables had been completely turned.

To compound the situation, Efil shot the falling rubble, shattering it into even smaller pieces, which spread out over a larger area. The burning birds that had turned from red to blue flocked together, changing the color above. They diligently sealed each and every path of escape in preparation for hunting down Dezes Gray.

I tried copying Ellie's fighting style, and now I see its merits. Accuracy is not necessarily all there is to fighting as an archer. There is a lot to consider, just as with cooking.

Seven more Pyrohydra now joined the effort to corner Dezes Gray. The golem tried to shoot them with its trailing orbs, but Efil brought those down, and the blade of light it was left with was nowhere near enough to cut its way through. By now, the air was filled with flames and the space that Dezes Gray had to move around in was steadily shrinking.

“Excuse me: this is checkmate.”

The hair clip that Efil was wearing glimmered, and the second overwhelmingly massive explosion of the day went off with such force

that even she bent back from the recoil. Upon detecting the sound, Dezes Gray determined that it could not dodge the attack and therefore directed its oversized arm towards the incoming arrow, charging forward while bracing with its blade in lieu of a shield. All throughout, its glowing orbs continued shooting out lasers in an attempt to whittle down the power of the arrow, but the flames surrounding the arrow merely deflected them without any reduction of speed. In fact, the arrow even seemed to be moving faster.

Eventually, it reached the blades that the golem had lined up. Instead of causing an explosion upon contact, it melted its way through with ease, closing in on Dezes Gray's arm. In response, the arm took in the streams of water it was wrapped in and ejected the liquid from the other side, effectively pulling off a rocket punch move. If Kelvin or Rion had been there—

“As I said, you’ve been checkmated.”

Efil was no longer looking at Dezes Gray. Her arrow pushed the golem's arm back and finally scored a clean hit on its body. The resulting explosion of blue and green flames completely obliterated the state-of-the-art mechanical creature.



While Efil and Dezes Gray's battle began in the air, a similar scene was playing out on the ground between Gerard and Cyan Rain. The knight was deftly using his sword and shield to duke it out with the golem rampaging about like a horse out of control.

Cyan Rain's basic fighting style was the lance charge, which it used while thundering everywhere in unpredictable directions. It had lost its heavy shield and the arm that held it, but that had made it lighter and therefore given it more speed and charging momentum.

However, Gerard was a stalwart knight who had arguably the highest Strength and Endurance in Kelvin's party. Not only was he able to fully grasp the golem's charges and the movements of its lance, he was also capable of landing his own hits when the giant mass thundered past. Cyan Rain's body, which was made of a material supposedly much tougher than Blue Rage's, was marred by countless sword strikes. After making one more pass, it blew out exhaust gas with a sound that, strangely, sounded like a groan.

“Hmph, it appears I will be able to return the favor from my past life. I shall take this puppet out of commission soon enough. Then I'm coming for you, Jildora!”

“I see your morale is high. However, if you think you're nearly done with Cyan Rain, you've another thing coming.”

“What?”

Cracking sounds rang out around the golem. A closer look

revealed that the water hitting the ground was freezing upon contact in a phenomenon similar to freezing rain. Everything that touched the gas was promptly freezing.

“According to past data, gas at high temperatures is practically useless against you and my daughter. So I reversed my approach. Instead, this golem is equipped with powerful freezing systems. What will you do now?”

Once again, Cyan Rain charged forward with its lance held steady. Even the lance itself was now expelling gas.

“Rah!”

Gerard didn't let these new developments get to him and focused solely on slashing Cyan Rain again as it thundered past. First, he parried the lance head with his great shield, then added that momentum to unleashing a powerful slash along the golem's bare torso. The high-pitched screech of metal being torn apart rang out. However, the attack was not as deep as he'd hoped.

What's...

Cracking sounds now began to emanate from the joints of Gerard's armor whenever he moved.

“Is your body not moving as well as it should? The rainwater that got into the cracks in your armor is freezing up and interfering with your mobility. The longer this fight goes on, the worse it'll get for you.”

“Ugh!”

Cyan Rain charged again, shattering the ice on the ground with its hooves. The golem itself seemed entirely unaffected by the massive amount of cooling gas it was blowing everywhere. In all likelihood, it had been specced for this specific environment. Unfortunately, Gerard's armor didn't come with a similar function. Even now, the unending deluge was slowly but surely robbing him of his maneuverability.

“So...what!”

“Oh?”

The clash of metal on metal continued without either side gaining much of an advantage. Despite lacking in agility, Gerard was still fighting Cyan Rain on even footing. The ice forming within his armor was indeed troublesome, but it wasn't affecting him nearly as much as it would if he'd had a flesh and blood body. He didn't feel the cold and his fingers were not growing numb. This was hardly his first time fighting at a disadvantage, and he had trained so much that the current situation was nowhere near enough to make him lose his cool.

“RAH!”

Most importantly, due to being nothing more than a suit of armor, he didn't grow fatigued. No matter how many times he swung his

sword, his accuracy and power never flagged.

“Cyan Rain.”

As if prompted, the centaur suddenly began gathering magic. This led to the air surrounding its lance sucking in the falling water, clearly indicating that the golem was charging up for a big move.

“Gerard, I have finished gauging your strength. I am more than impressed; you are like a different person compared to when I last saw you in Trycen. However, if that is all the speed you can muster, you cannot dodge this.”

Cyan Rain’s lance started expelling even greater amounts of gas. Worse, it broke off into four segments, with bitingly cold air bursting out from the gaps. There was no doubt in Gerard’s mind that the golem intended on using an ultimate attack next.

It just so happened that several seconds beforehand, he had received a telepathic message from Efil.

::Gerard-san, watch out for falling debris. I will now proceed to destroy this rain.::

::You’ll what?!::

The knight very much wanted to wail, “You couldn’t have picked a worse time!” but if the rain stopped, his joints would thaw. As such, he decided to think of it as an opportunity.

Just as his motivation rose, something fell down from above. Of course, it was the shower of burning rubble.

::Efil, falling rubble! There’s still rubble falling everywhere!::

The knight, who had managed to maintain his cool so far, finally showed signs of being flustered. However, the rain had indeed stopped, and the heat from the falling rubble had served to melt the ice in his armor, giving him back his mobility.

“Hmm, this won’t do. Cyan Rain, pay it no mind and fire.”

Fwoooooosh!

The heat from the flames was affecting even the ice of the lance, melting its previously razor-sharp icy edge. Knowing that he was now the one short on time, Jildora ordered the golem to run Gerard through. Pieces of ice stuck to the tip of its weapon, turning it into a disfigured spear of immense proportions.

“Using your ultimate attack out of desperation, I see. It does appear powerful, but at the same time, it leaves you wide open.” Gerard lifted his greatsword. “Ten...gai!”

Magic the color of ink swirled furiously around the blade of the Demonic Sword and formed a flying slice when Gerard swung the weapon with incredible force. The slice swallowed up the ice spear on its way, picking up even greater speed and destructive power. Having become a terrible beast in and of itself, the attack eventually reached Cyan Rain’s right shoulder. A moment later, the golem that had

boasted such impressive size disappeared almost entirely, leaving behind only its four hooves. When Tengai slammed into the far wall, it continued digging in and soon vanished into the darkness beyond.

"Hmm, I thought I wouldn't be able to land a hit considering how the big boy was running around, but I guess you really never know what can happen." Gerard glared at his opponent and directed the point of his sword his way. "Wouldn't you agree, Jildora?"

Efil, who had just finished her own fight, landed with all eight Pyrohydra heads. "Now the golems that were your pride and joy are both destroyed. You have very little chance of victory left. Do you still wish to resist?"

Jildora shrugged. "I wasn't trying to win; I'm here to gather battle data and observe how you two fight. If I win, that will mean more development, but if I lose, I'll get ideas for how I can improve my creations."

"You seem entirely unconcerned with anything other than your research," Gerard observed. "Is that due to your identity as an Apostle?"

"Oh, no, this is simply how I am. In a stroke of fortune, the order that Arbitrator gave me was something I had already accomplished. Given that, I'm left to do whatever I want. And I have chosen to create something that can be a match for the gods with my own hands!"

"In any case," Efil interrupted coldly, "this is where your life ends. You have made light of people's feelings far too many times for the sake of your personal ambition. All the resentment that you earned has caught up to you."

"Give it up, Jildora," Gerard added.

Despite having a burning arrow tip and a jet-black greatsword pointed right at his face, Jildora laughed. In fact, he guffawed loudly, as if Gerard and Efil had told him a hilarious joke.

"HA HA HA! Truly! You truly amuse me. Make light of feelings? You couldn't be more wrong. I don't make light of them. Rather, I see the enormous possibility that they hold. I've lived long enough to see feelings drastically alter a situation many times. Something I've noticed is that the more someone feels for another, the greater the power they exhibit when that person is hurt."

"What are you trying to say?" Gerard growled.

"I want to see it. Come, show me the power you can tap into when you exceed your limits and reach that realm where people seem to enact miracles. When you do, I just might gain inspiration that normally wouldn't occur to me when I'm alone."

"You lowlife—"

"Hack, hack."

Gerard was suddenly interrupted by Efil coughing violently. She

stared at the bloodstained hand that she had instinctively clapped over her mouth in utter bewilderment, not having the slightest clue what was happening to her.

Jildora's peeling laughter filled the air. "Sickness is such a terrifying foe, is it not? It is sickness that many a fighter and champion, no matter their strength and renown, finally succumb to. Do you remember the green glass cases that Cyan Rain smashed open? Now, Gerard...what do you think was inside of those cases?"



Long ago, a small country called Alcahl existed in the central parts of the Eastern Continent. Though the times were rife with war, the wise king used his wits to maintain his country's neutrality and build good relations with all the large neighboring countries, which was nothing short of a miracle.

Normally, if a country's lands were fertile enough to make them self-sufficient, that would be enough in these times to make said country a target of their neighbors. However, the king used his country's small size and its usefulness as a buffer zone between his neighboring kingdoms to avoid having to go to war. His political prowess was enough to leave the kings of said neighbors groaning in frustration.

Gerard belonged to the knight order loyal to Alcahl. He came from a family of farmers but was blessed with good fortune and the king's great foresight, allowing him to eventually rise to the position of the head of Alcahl's knights.

The size and scale of the order Gerard took charge of was small enough that it was almost expected they be ridiculed as backwater knights in comparison to the knight orders of their neighbors. Yet that didn't stop Gerard from carrying out his duties as the leader with pride. To him, there could be no higher honor—that was how much he loved his country.

With his younger wife, Betty, and their beloved daughter, Connie, at his side, Gerard was happy. The king of Alcahl had built an idyllic country with no strife in the midst of a dark era full of betrayal. Meanwhile, the king's compatriots and his people strove to support each other and bring the country to even greater heights. None dreamed that Alcahl would soon fall to ruin.

The mysterious plague that suddenly took the country by storm claimed the king as its first victim before spreading to the rest of the castle, its town, and then the rest of the country. It sank its venomous fangs into many as the number of casualties rose.

Once symptoms began to show, it was already too late. There was no treatment for the plague, and the afflicted would rapidly weaken

before dying within the day.

Though the country was still in the throes of confusion, having lost their great leader, Gerard was one of the ones who managed to respond to this crisis rather well. He struggled until the end. Until his wife and daughter, friends, and subordinates had all perished...

“According to my memories, you were clutching your dying daughter in your arms as you tried to flee the country. You did well in those apocalyptic times. If you’d had as much strength then as you do now, you might have actually succeeded. Not that it would have changed your or your daughter’s fate.”

“Jildora, you bastard. It was you all along?!” Gerard exclaimed.

“Grk...urgh...my body, it’s...” Atop her Pyrohydra’s head, Efil dropped to her knees with her hand over her mouth. Fresh blood slipped through the gaps between her fingers as her face paled. It was clear that she was not well.

“Correct! Those glass cases contained the pathogen that destroyed Alcahl. It took a while for the effects to show thanks to the size of my laboratory and the resistance bestowed upon you by that trinket you got from the Goddess. Don’t worry though; thanks to my modifications, it’s even stronger than it was back then. Even if it takes longer due to your resistance stats, you’ll still die in pain.”

“Yooouu!” Gerard’s vision was dyed red as he was consumed by rage. Almost as if it were responding to its wielder’s emotions, the Demon Sword Dainsleif in his hand swirled violently with magic.

::W-Wait... I’m fine, Gerard-san. Please, calm your...rage!::

::But—::

::No ifs, ands, or buts. If it will take time to kill me, then there is still hope. Right now what we must do is defeat Jildora as quickly and completely as we can!::

Even as her legs trembled beneath her, Efil stood and readied her bow. However, there was no strength in her arms. While it wasn’t impossible, she was not in any condition to launch arrows with real power behind them.

The Pyrohydras and birds of fire around her all seemed worried about their master. Still, the sight of Efil’s courageous figure allowed Gerard to regain some form of composure.

::Understood. But lass, you should stay back and focus on your recovery. Wait, what about Clotho?::

Though it didn’t use words, Clotho sent a signal through the Network to indicate it was okay. Apparently, Clotho, as a slime, was treated the same way Gerard, being an empty suit of armor, was when it came to this malady.

::Good. You protect Efil, Clotho. Don’t hold back with your

recovery items; give her as much of the best stuff as she needs. I'll take any scolding my liege feels fit to give, so I'm leaving my granddaughter to you!::

::G-Gerard....::

But it seemed like Gerard was set on this plan, so neither Efil nor Clotho said anything more.

Clotho stretched out its body thinly so that it covered Efil completely, hiding her away. Going along with that, Efil had her blue Pyrohydras weave together like a ball of yarn, creating another layer of flaming protection. In addition, her birds swarmed around the perimeter, creating a powerful and ethereal fortress. Inside all of that, Efil was receiving Clotho's diligent ministrations.

"I see, so you're still capable of such grand magic. How scary, even for my daughter."

"Shut up." Gerard's tone held none of its usual cheerfulness. It came out cold and quiet, but it was still audible above everything else. His helmet made a metallic noise as he turned to stare straight at his enemy, and Jildora could almost swear he saw a red light shining from the depths of the knight's helmet.

"What?"

"I told you to shut up. Have you gone senile in your old age?"

"Oh ho!"

Gerard was no longer rampaging around as his rage dictated. He was still furious, but he was now giving off the impression that he was carefully pouring his energy into what fundamentally made him powerful. That change was exactly what Jildora wanted in the subject he was observing, making him even more interested in Gerard.

"Hm, so you want me to shut up. Then what do you plan on doing after that? Do you plan on killing me and searching for the cure yourself? All before the elf dies? Unfortunately for you, I haven't prepared anything like that. This one is special, you see. Though I've maxed out its lethality and infectiousness, the pathogen itself also dies quickly. Once the afflicted is dead, the threat of the sickness dies within a few days. Well, as long as the pathogen dies before my daughter does, all will be—"

"I told you to shut up." Gerard's sword was already slicing through Jildora's shoulder as he spoke.

"Nnrrggh?!" Jildora pulled the trigger of his gunsword almost entirely out of reflex. Luckily for him, the round hit the base of Gerard's sword and exploded. With just a hair left before he was completely bisected, Jildora had managed to stop Gerard's onslaught.

His speed is incomparable to when he fought Cyan Rain, Jildora thought. That man, what did he... Mm?

As he pondered, Jildora squinted, trying to confirm traces of red

and pitch-black magic leaking out of the gaps of Gerard's armor. From what he could tell, it hadn't been there before. *I see—that sword is the cause. How interesting.*

Jildora's wound was deep, but it didn't seem like he cared. He simply traced back the path of the faintly ominous magic to Demon Sword Dainsleif, reasoning that the magic being output from the sword was entering Gerard's armor and explosively raising the knight's abilities.

"Well, let's see. First, I'm going to reject everything you just said. That girl is not your daughter, she's my granddaughter. Anybody who causes my granddaughter harm will know no mercy from my sword. Prepare yourself."



Up until now, Jildora had been using his Unique Skill, Eternal Return, to transfer his consciousness to other bodies, which was how he had managed to live for so long. No one knew what race he was originally, nor did they know how many decades, centuries, or even millennia he had been walking this earth. Those facts were long since considered unimportant by the man himself. He felt no hesitation over using this power.

Transferring consciousness was a concept that could be explained simply, but the power itself was not as all-powerful as it might seem. Along with the usual cooldown time associated with such skills, Jildora's stats would change to whatever stats his new body had. So the target body needed to have a certain amount of intelligence for the ability to work. In the end, it was that part of the ability that Jildora hated the most.



Every use of the skill came with a feeling of loss as Jildora's hard-earned stats were reset, but each body also came with a new lineup of skills. He'd been using the ability for so long that he was able to look at it objectively, but when he had first started out, he'd felt truly despondent.

Every new body gained through Eternal Return lacked the abilities he'd worked hard to build up with his previous body, and all that he could take with him were his memories, experiences, and any ability that wasn't tied to a skill.

Even so, Jildora had expended the effort to train up his new body on both the second and third go. He'd even carefully picked his new bodies so that he would be as close as possible to his current body's abilities.

However, in the end, other people's bodies were just that: other people's. No two bodies could be exactly alike. No matter how much *he* trained and raised his level, the fulfillment he felt lessened by the day.

Strangely, as if he was trying to find his purpose in life, Jildora's existence had been composed of training himself in order to reach further heights. Though it was all for naught, every time he moved on to a new body, his old one had been nearing the peak of its abilities. No matter how much he tried or how many strong enemies he fought, every new body came with a corresponding drop in stats.

There was also a limit on being able to find a new body with the same level. Jildora knew that if things continued as they were, he would not be able to reach the next plateau, that something was wrong with the way he was doing things.

The ups and downs of his emotions had flattened out, and he'd started leading days that resembled repetitive work more than anything else. After such a long lifetime, any normal person would go crazy, yet Jildora still continued using his ability.

After a point, the only thing left in his heart was pure obsession. He simply repeated what he was doing over and over, believing that doing so would someday lead to a breakthrough, before repeating everything all over again. He no longer knew how many people he'd sacrificed or how many lifetimes he'd led.

One day, Jildora had had a sudden thought. He'd hit upon the idea that all currently existing races had a limit to their growth. Since that was the case, his course of action was clear: all he had to do was create a new race with his own hands.

A mortal creating a new race, which would exist in a different dimension of power, was nothing short of heresy. However, for better or worse, Jildora had no moral compunctions that would stop him.

What he did have was a near-infinite amount of time.

Jildora still did not consider himself a scholar. In fact, the way he thought was much closer to a warrior than anything else, and his ideas were as shallow as such a thing implied. Even so, he finally found a new source of joy in this decision. At last, he felt a yearning for knowledge that he had never felt in any of the lives he'd wasted and sacrificed before. Jildora was naturally greedy for anything that would lead to personal growth, so he scoured all the books he could find like a madman, almost as if he were devouring them. This phase alone took several lifetimes, which meant several bodies.

What made him happiest during this time was that he could take his knowledge with him, unlike the strength and abilities he had been training before. Every time he thought about that—and he thought about it a lot—he was filled with a sense of happiness. It was almost like a drug.

As Jildora consumed as many books and vacuumed up as much wisdom as he could, his point of view broadened. He became the kind of person who could throw away his reliance on stats, as they were just numbers.

Eventually, he took the first step towards his dream with the knowledge he'd fostered, becoming active in as many places as he deemed necessary, from the research facility of a large country to the lawless underworld, to a cult worshipping an evil deity. He was even a member of a certain empire's technological development bureau, and he had his hand in a small country's destruction because he thought it necessary.

Jildora knew that even if a research subject was so far-fetched that it could not be realized in a hundred years, it could be brought to fruition in a thousand. He knew that knowledge would never betray him. From that, a new idea was born: a hint could come from even the most incompetent of sources.

Though Jildora's world was dyed an ugly black, to him, his life was shining bright. To him, he was only a short distance from his goal. He just needed a little more progress, *a little more*—

“What fascinating research you’re conducting. Is there anything I can help you with? Also, do you believe in God?”

It was only recently, within the past couple of hundred years, that an unexpected sponsor had appeared to Jildora. The girl, who was conventionally beautiful with her silver hair, had suddenly shown up in the research lab he had kept hidden for many years. Since the line she spouted was so amusing, he directed the girl to the prototype he was working on, challenging her to be the test opponent for his machine.

“Are you sure that’s what you want? I could offer you knowledge and

techniques from another world, stuff that the gods deem taboo...but if this will satisfy you, then allow me."

Once she saw what she would be up against, she reacted to the golem with joy and wonder.

"Whoa, you built this by yourself?! So, making something bipedal really is possible—I can feel the romanticism!"

She stayed silent as they fought, reporting in again after defeating it.

"And that's it."

After that, Jildora had finally experienced the otherworldly plateau he had so dreamed of, that thing he had never caught a glimpse of in all his long years. The girl was truly attractive, enough that he wanted nothing more than to dissect her for data. But he couldn't, since she would become an ally.

Having gained knowledge that he would normally never have gotten his hands on, Jildora's research improved by leaps and bounds.

Finally, the last order came to Jildora: his final mission. After that, he was promised that in the name of God his wish would be granted. However, it had nothing to do with his current fight against Gerard. Right now, Jildora had to work out a new plan.

Jildora's current body was that of Jin D'Alba, the lieutenant general of Trycen's prided Steel Knight Order. His body had been trained from a young age by his mighty father and possessed the S Rank Sword Mastery skill as well as a tough, well-trained physique.

However, that was speaking from a normal perspective. While Jin's body was in fact excellent, because Jildora had spent all his time steeped in research, its only use was to slightly recall his distant past's sense of belligerence.

Still, was this body capable of competing against anyone from Kelvin's party? No, it wouldn't even be a real fight if Jildora decided to face them head-on. If someone tried to find someone of Jin's caliber by digging from the world's strongest down, they would have to go quite deep. Fighting now would necessitate both using the terrain of his own laboratory to his advantage and the equipment to make full use of both Jildora's knowledge and Jin's strength.

On the other side, Gerard was moving almost like an entirely different person from before. The magic swirling around his demon sword, so black that it could be mistaken for miasma, would enter Gerard's armor, imbuing him with such speed that Jildora was hard-pressed to keep up. Not only that, but the blows dealt by the blade were now so powerful that even the lightest swings threatened to rip Jildora's gunsword from his hands.

Then there was the matter of Gerard's armor. Normally, Jildora could expect his gunsword to deal *some* amount of damage, but in the

face of that plate, his weapon was practically useless. Though he was able to intercept Efil's arrows with the gunsword, he couldn't deal a single scratch to Gerard's armor. The knight's Attack and Defense stats, which he'd already had in spades, had been further enhanced. His Agility stat was also being boosted to a level unthinkable for someone in a full suit of armor.

Gerard's normal speed was already comparable to Sera's, so either way, Jildora was in trouble.

"I forgot to mention, I have more hospitality to offer. Meet my cutting-edge creations. Clarett Hangar, Ibilis, deploy."

Responding to Jildora's voice, a portion of the lab's floor was raised to the ceiling, revealing an elevator that looked like a tower-shaped vertical parking structure, inside of which were a pair of golems the same size as Cyan Rain and Dezes Gray, but this time one was green and the other purple.

"Looks like I'll have to get a bit rough here," Gerard remarked. A large slashing scar appeared on both units' chests, instantly turning them to scrap. This happened after they had only taken a single step, and Jildora was unable to react to the attack.

Emotions he shouldn't have felt rose unbidden from the depths of his heart as he was reminded of the time he had faced off against Serge.

"You bastard... There were more tricks up your sleeve?!"

"Don't worry, I'll go all out when I defeat you. I already have an idea of how I'll kill you." Gerard's body flickered and wavered, as if he wasn't really there.



Overwhelmed by the massive pressure being given off by Gerard, Jildora took a step back, then another as he unconsciously shrank from the challenge. His cutting-edge golems, which were the same as Cyan Rain, the golem who had fought evenly with Gerard before, had been instantly and simultaneously eliminated. There was no way for their creator to ever have predicted such an outcome.

Jildora still had crowds of spare golems inside his lab, but none of them were a match for Gerard as he was now. He couldn't imagine them defeating the knight no matter how many of them he roused. At this point, it was nothing short of a bad plan to try and win with only golems.

"How to kill me?" Jildora started. "Keh... Keh heh heh... You're saying you're thinking of how to kill *me*? That's some hilarious drivel you're spouting there. This body is that of Dan D'Alba's son, Jin D'Alba. I know that you're friendly with that man—can you really bear to point your sword at his son?"

Jildora immediately changed tack. He knew that brute strength was not all there was to the world. There were more underhanded tactics like shaking up the enemy's mental state to lead them to self-destruction or using illness to finish them off, and he knew that such things could turn a situation on its head.

Good people could not touch the ones they loved, and those close to them were always weak points. Jildora, who had lived for what seemed like an eternity, was especially skilled at such methods, as he made extensive use of them.

Slice!

"Nrgh!" Jildora grunted in pain. By the time he'd noticed, the arm holding his gunsword had been hewn off. Gerard had shown no hesitation whatsoever as the light of his eyes from within his helmet glowed red.

"Don't underestimate me," he declared. "Knights are always ready to give their lives for their country. That goes for Dan-dono and Jin-dono as well."

"Is that so! Then that means I don't have to feel guilty about doing this!" Jildora paid no heed to the arm he'd lost as he retreated at full speed. The moment he did so, arm-shaped golems mobilized from the floor around his new position towards his old position. They surrounded Gerard as they appeared, each armed with guns and light-based blades. They moved surprisingly fast.

In the end, though, they were only there to buy time, as they had originally been made to help test things in the lab. Compared to Cyan Rain, they had far inferior stats and were bisected with a single swing of Gerard's sword.

"Stop resisting! It's useless!" Gerard chased after Jildora. The distance between the two shrank in the blink of an eye as the knight got nearly within striking distance. He brought his blade up just as Jildora stabbed the stump of his arm with an injector.

Jildora sucked in a breath through his teeth in pain. Though Gerard knitted his brows in consternation upon seeing the unfamiliar semitransparent tool, he did not stop. However, the inside of the injector was already empty, and all Gerard could see was a droplet of some mysterious liquid hanging on to the end of the needle.

"Useless?" Jildora replied. "I think not. Watch this!" His skin burst along with an earsplitting sound, and the Apostle's form started to shift unnaturally.

Suddenly, the stump of his arm swelled. It burgeoned with flesh like a mountain of balloons, and it was an awful sight to behold. This ugly multiplication continued, the flesh growing ever bigger and uglier in contrast to Jin's fairly handsome face.

The new arm, which resembled a giant clump of fat, swung

towards Gerard.

“Hrmph!” Gerard grunted, using his sword to bisect the approaching arm once, twice, three times. Even though it was easily split by the power of the knight’s demon sword, it only regrew again and again from the injected stump. At some point, the flesh of the first arm Gerard had cut off had returned to its host. It was almost as if the arm itself had a will, as all the arms he had cut off were regenerating while they advanced on him. They were still no match for his sword, but he was being buried deeper and deeper in the surrounding crowd of undying arms, and there was no end in sight.

“I’m glad to know this body is willing to sacrifice itself. That means I can modify it freely,” Jildora taunted him. “Then finally, I can take your body.”

Jildora had already verified that his Eternal Return would work on monsters that passed its restrictions. Gerard’s body, which was humanoid and possessed intelligence, was perfect for his purposes. He only needed a piece of his transformed arm to touch the knight’s head for all the pieces to be in place to allow him to use his ability. Once that happened, he no longer had any use for his current body, from which he’d been trading his life span for a forced regenerative ability.

Out of all the bodies Jildora had taken thus far, Gerard’s would quite possibly be the best. With it under his control, it would be easy for him to finish the fight since his remaining opponents were a near-dead elf and a slime. With that, not only would he have gained the best body he’d ever had but also an excellent gene specimen in an elf that had been freed of a curse.

Jildora could already see his busy future. Even though he’d lost all his cutting-edge golems, he would gain more than enough to make up for it. His borrowed face twisted in joy as he laughed from the heart. “Let’s end this!”

The entire laboratory was now covered in arms thanks to his maxed-out regeneration multiplying the numbers of arms. They followed Jildora’s orders, converging upon Gerard from all sides. The Apostle’s plan was to wring out all of Jin’s life force to end things with this attack.

“This is all you could muster, Jildora? I’m a little disappointed.” Gerard’s shield, the Dreadnought Legalus, transformed into a mirror that reflected the ugly forms of all the arms around it. Gerard had chosen a defensive skill that allowed him to reflect all physical attacks. This ability, now strengthened thanks to his Unique Skill, Self-Transcendence, applied not only to Gerard’s shield, but to his entire body. The ability had originally been seen on one of Jildora’s own golems, Tyrant Mirror.

Bwoom!

The moment the mutant arms had completely tightened the noose, they were blown away to every corner of the lab. Some crashed into walls and turned to paste; some flew into Efil's flames and were incinerated. No matter where the arms fell, they ended up dead.

"Wha—?!" Jildora reacted with surprise. "Grkkk!"

"I'm taking that arm." Like a ghost, Gerard disappeared from view before showing up behind the Apostle and stabbing his blade into Jildora's right shoulder. He sliced off the mutated arm and used Dainsleif's power to absorb all its strength. That included everything from its magic to whatever was granted to it by that mysterious liquid.

"Gghh...gah! Aghh...! Y...ou fool!" Jildora exclaimed with difficulty. He'd used whatever drug was left in his body to strengthen his muscles and lock the sword in place. Then, he thrust out with his remaining hand. The speed of this action was as fast as a martial arts master, probably an echo of his past. As his hand rushed towards Gerard's helmet, he screamed, *I've got you!* inside his heart.

However, his fist slipped past Gerard's helmet and touched only air. His mouth hung open in shock. *Gerard's right there. He should be right there!* Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to touch his target.

"Wh-Whyyy...!" Jildora groaned.

"Pitiful," was Gerard's only reply. The knight had been informed, along with Kelvin and everyone else, of Jildora's level and abilities by Ange. It was only natural for them to have come up with a countermeasure beforehand, even more so because Jildora was the cause of all the suffering that had happened to Gerard's family and entire country. They had prepared carefully for this showdown.

Gerard had obtained a new skill: Ghostform. It was the antithesis of the Materialization skill, and it allowed material objects like a suit of armor to become immaterial. In this state, Gerard was completely immune to physical attacks, though he would take massive damage from Holy Magic.

Gerard was able to freely react and turn the skill on or off in response to attacks of Jildora's speed. In truth, he could have used that to avoid the pile-on from before as well.

"If you want my helmet so much, then here, you can have it. It's been filled to the brim with your poison by now, so you can have it all. No need to hold back. It's just gotten a little stronger because it's being treated as part of my equipment for some reason. If you've got some sort of cure prepared just for you, it should still work."

"What?! Sto—" Jildora cried.

Gerard took off his head—or rather, his helmet—and forced it onto Jildora, who tried to pry it off with his left hand. Unfortunately, his hand couldn't find purchase on the helmet as the poison that had destroyed Alcahl flooded the Apostle's system.



The pathogen that Jildora had developed was an embodiment of disaster that brought Alcahl to its knees in just a few days. This biological weapon, which had since been improved in the areas of lethality, infection rate, and resistance to magic, had been even further strengthened inside Gerard's armor and was now inconceivably powerful.

"Ghh, gurghahgll... A-Aagghhh!" Jildora was already finding it difficult to form words.

First, there was pain. Pure agony and anguish that would instantly drive a person to the brink of death assaulted Jildora's body. Though he was on the brink, he could not die. He was kept just on the verge of consciousness as the illness ate away at him, and every second of torture seemed to stretch on forever.

"I-I'll ceaze to be myzeeelllff..."

Then came the invasion of his memories. The treasured vaults of knowledge he'd gathered within himself over countless lifetimes were ransacked as his precious knowledge was taken away. It resembled the vagueness of memory that came with old age and seemed an appropriate end, as if time were finally catching up to him.

"My flesh, id's falling! Id's falling away!"

After that was physical damage. Jildora was running a high fever, which quickly broke through his body's limits and became uncontrollable. His body literally cooked itself as the water inside boiled away, driving him into a delirious state where he couldn't tell if his surroundings were burning as well or if it was just him. He had no recourse but to roll around to try and ease the sensation.

All that was only a portion of the symptoms occurring within his body. Any further punishment would only be known to the man himself as he experienced the infinite tortures of where he was going.

"I'm going to need you to return my helmet," Gerard said as he walked up to Jildora's rolling body, stopping to rip the helmet off the man's head. He hadn't expected the pathogen to have grown so powerful, and the fact that he was now feeling a little sympathy was a sign of just how good a person he was.

However, he would not raise a finger to help. No matter how Jildora begged for aid or how meekly he apologized, Gerard did not intend to allow him to escape his torment. He was determined to burn the image of Jildora, his long-sworn enemy, suffering into his memory.

Still, this plague sure is scary. Jildora's already just a lump of infectious flesh. Oh, that reminds me, I need to unequip the plague; otherwise, it might infect Efil.

The pathogen that had entered Gerard's armor went back to

normal as soon as he unequipped it, as it was no longer receiving the benefit of Self-Transcendence. But the portion that had already infected a target was not included in that, so there was no change to Jildora.

“Ggghhhrgghh...! Zo dis...dis is to be the end of me?! No... Nooo!”

“Yes, that’s what you should have said instead of committing the atrocities you did. You’re a great fool; you could have used all that power you have to do something better for the world,” Gerard lamented.

“Haghh... Aghh... For...the world? What would that accomplish?! War drives innovation, and revolutions are built upon sacrifice! In the end, this world is flawed! Grrgaahh!”

Gerard took a moment before responding. “How sad. So, you have always been by yourself, doing things all on your own? You should have people you can call friends, no?”

“If that’s what you call two people exploiting each other for profit...then...” Jildora spat out as he vomited blood. It was obvious that he was going to die within moments. Even before being infected, he’d forced his body to develop regenerative powers in exchange for his life span, so there was no hope of recovery.

Jangle.

As Jildora writhed in pain, something metal fell out of his pocket. It was an elaborately made key—a Holy Key.

“Hm?” For a moment, Gerard could have sworn that the Holy Key had made some sort of sound. He tried to concentrate on what he could hear, but all he caught were the sounds of Jildora dying.

Was I just hearing things? No, wait. The sound was real. What began as quiet white noise grew louder until it became a clearly audible voice.

“Did I finally get through? Great! I did! That’s perfect; the feeling of all your efforts being rewarded is so sweet!”

The voice Gerard heard sounded like someone was acting in a play.

“I heard everything. That was cold of you, Jildora-san! I’m a friend! You don’t have to carry your worries alone!”

Gerard was speechless. It seemed that it had been listening this whole time, as it was insisting that it was a friend. Before Gerard, who was suspicious of it, could act, Jildora forced himself to speak through ragged breaths.

“Guh... Controller...?”

“Yes, exactly! I’ve been pushed back and lost several Divine Pillars. I somehow managed to get away, but it’s taken time to regroup my forces. I must say, it truly does hurt me that I wasn’t able to come save you. This must be what heartbreak feels like.”

Gerard looked up the information on the Follower Network. Controller, or Trycen's former general Tristan Faaze, was reported to have been eliminated just a little while ago by Shutola's group. However, since his body had not been found, the report also noted that it was possible he had survived. The knight had no idea how, but Tristan had survived and managed to evade his comrades' watchful eyes.

"You...zave me? Khha ha, ghha ha...! Izz...dat a joke?!"

"Ha ha ha! Now that is the joke! My precious comrades must survive! They must! As long as my comrades are alive, I will never give up on them! That being said, it seems you are almost entirely dead, Jildora-san. Rather, I could go so far as to say you are dead. On top of that, I don't have the power to save you—how cruel fate can be! No, I can do nothing but express my deep regret. Truly, I am heartbroken. Only Arbitrator or Protector could heal you, in all likelihood, but they aren't free. I would love to save my friends, but I can't put my other friends in danger to do so... Ahh, what a conundrum! By the way, there's a chance I could be infected, so allow me to refrain from rescuing you."

"Ghh..."

"Now, now, no need to be so down. It's all fine as long as you're alive, yes? If it's for my good friend Jildora-san, I will go to great lengths and spare almost no effort! Yes, because you're such a good friend of mine, there's no need to hold back on my account! So enjoy this precious experience as much as you like while you can!"

"You bastard... Even in de end..."

While Tristan continued on and on, Jildora had reached his limit. His life force thinned as both his breath and heartbeat gradually ceased. The blood flowing from his wounds slowed before stopping completely, and at last, the light left his eyes.

"Now then. Seeing as Jildora-san has died, this Holy Key will likely cease to function momentarily."

That gave Gerard pause. "That's rather cold for someone you claim to be your friend."

"I believe your name is Gerard? Unfortunately, I don't have the time to debate you. Instead, I'll just leave you with a piece of free advice: now that you've gotten your revenge, why not help your friends? Unlike me, it shouldn't be too late for you."

The fortress of fire that Efil had constructed was changing color from blue to red, meaning she was weakening from Jildora's plague.

"Right, well, it would be good if there was someone who could heal Jildora-san's plague...but seeing as I'm your enemy, all I can do is pray for you from afar. Well, I will admit that on a personal level I owe that maid of yours, so I don't want her to die like this. Goodbye—"

"Hm?! Wait!" Though Gerard raised his voice, the Holy Key had

already lost its power.



The voice being transmitted through the Holy Key was cut off, and Gerard went to confirm that it had indeed lost its power. He made sure to throw the key into Clotho's storage just in case, though.

After giving Jildora's body a final glare, the knight hurried to Efil and her protective barrier of red flame.

::I've taken Jildora down, Efil! I would like to make sure you're okay. Can you undo your defenses?::

Once Gerard sent that message through the Network, the birds of fire flocking around the swirling flames opened a path, and the ruby of fire that had been suspended in the air lowered itself to the ground. The blaze surrounding Efil gradually disappeared from the bottom up, revealing Clotho, who had stretched itself into a thin membrane.

::Good work. How's the princess doing? Is the medicine working?::

Clotho jiggled in response. *That's the jiggle for when things aren't going well. I'm guessing the medicine worked, but not as well as we'd hoped, and the illness has been progressing too quickly?*

Figuring things would go quicker if Gerard could see for himself, Clotho retracted and reformed itself into a simple bed under Efil.

"Haaghh... Haaghh..." Efil was gasping for breath.

After a long look, Gerard muttered, "This...might be bad."

Lying as she was on top of Clotho, it was clear to see the red that had spread all over her normally white skin, indicating the remarkably high fever she was running.

"Gerard...san...I..."

"Don't speak. You need rest."

Efil's consciousness was faint, probably because she had been weakened by the fever. Even then, she never let go of her bow. Was it her pride as a maid that drove her so? Either way, that didn't change the fact that she was being ravaged by Jildora's plague. Though they were holding things together thanks to Clotho's healing items, they needed to find a proper cure.

Gerard took a moment to ponder their next steps. *Is there really no other way than to heal her with the highest-ranking White Magic? But the only ones capable of that among our party would be my king and the princess... Mm? Wait a second, I can't reach either of them through telepathy. Mmmm? That seems...bad. Could they be in a real pinch?*

Kelvin and Melfina were currently out of contact. That went for both physical communication and telepathy. Gerard had no idea where they were, and trying to find them when they might be in the middle of combat was too far-fetched an idea.

The only other possibility was Shutola, who had been taught Blue

Magic by Melfina. Unfortunately, that wasn't nearly as effective at healing as White Magic was, so hoping for it to heal Efil when the medicine made by Melfina had failed was a long shot.

Graargh! Think! Think, man! Use that gray matter of yours to the fullest; that's what it's there for! Graaahhh! Gerard was panicking. He felt his back up against the wall. There wasn't even a shadow left of the intimidating presence he had exuded during the battle, and he was quite confused.

Seeing its comrade like that, Clotho stretched out and prodded Gerard on the shoulder. Once it had gotten the old knight's attention, it started to draw words in the air.

"Wh-What? Colette's with Rion and she can use White Magic? She can?!"

Clotho continued on. Its ability to write in the air was quite smooth and masterful.

"They've just finished their fight with Protector, so we can make it? And...they're with Deramis's pope for some reason, so there's a good chance we can get the healing we need. With Colette's power, she can even manipulate this holy ground to create a path for us. You're currently talking to Rion through your clone—Clothooooo, you're a genius!"

Clotho needed to spawn several hands to stop Gerard from scooping it up into a bear hug then and there. It retrieved an ice pillow and cold towels from storage and placed them around Efil's neck and along her sides. These were medical goods that Efil had prepared just in case something happened on their journey. She probably never expected to be the one needing them, but her preparations had not been in vain.

While still maintaining its bed shape and attempting to jostle Efil as little as possible, Clotho started to move. The slime skillfully shifted only the parts of it that were making contact with the ground, but it was able to reach a surprising speed. It seemed to know where to go.

"Whew... If I was alone, I would've been useless. It's great to have friends. Anyway..."

Gerard wanted to take one last look at Jildora's corpse before chasing after Clotho, but he thought better of it. Instead, he turned around to face the sight in full. He knew that his comrade in arms, Dan, was quite worried about his missing son. Part of him wanted to bring the body back so that they could hold a funeral for Jin, but it had been infected by the plague strengthened by Gerard's ability and was now a container for the worst kind of poison imaginable. If he took it back without another thought, it could very well bring about a second coming of the tragedy that had befallen Alcahl.

"I don't want dear Shutola to go through that..."

Gerard hit upon another idea. *What if I bring back a memento instead?*

He looked around and found the gunsword Jildora had been using. Even if it wasn't Jin's actual weapon, it would be better than nothing. So he picked up the sword. Once Efil was healed, Gerard resolved to have it blessed by Colette in order to erase any trace of the plague.

"Jildora is dead, and the enemy is breaking everywhere like snapping bamboo. But Tristan has escaped and is still active, while Efil will not be able to rejoin the fight. We still can't afford to let our guards down..."

Gerard felt the magic in his sword course through his body as he made off after Clotho.



::Yeah, okay... I got it! We'll be waiting for you!::

Having defeated the strongest Apostle, Serge Flore, Rion was free to talk to Gerard through telepathy and hear that they were heading towards her in order to treat Efil's illness. She had also been told that they needed a direct path as well as a barrier to prevent the spread of the disease.

"Clotho and Gramps are carrying Efil-nee over, they said. Are you okay, Colette?"

"I'm changing this section... Nrrgh... Smooth, gentle..." She gulped. "But still direct. Then comes the highest class of status effect protection..." She gasped. "N-No problem! Yep! Urp!"

Almost all—or rather, all of the things—Gerard had asked for could only be accomplished by Colette, who could use esoteric Oracle techniques. She was burning with motivation thanks to the mission she'd been given and was eagerly downing MP potions as she worked.

"Sorry, I don't have the ability to do any of this, so I can't help. As a father, it hurts my heart, ha ha ha." The pope, Philip Deramilus, used a special spell to transfer his magic to Colette as he rubbed his daughter's back. What he was saying indicated sorrow, but his expression said he was enjoying what was happening. It was the face of a father who had finally managed some skinship with his daughter after a long time in the cold. In other words, he was overjoyed.



“Um...does it seem like you’ll be able to heal Efil-san?”

“No need to worry, Setsuna,” Philip replied. “Though we may not be much use in a fight, we’re the best in the world at healing. Not even a cursed illness or a curse made from a thousand years of grudges can stand up to us. I’ll swear it on our names as the pope and the Oracle.”

“Uh, but Colette looks like she’s ready to throw up again...”

“Don’t worry about that either. Deramis’s Oracle has a will of steel!”

I’m not sure you should be saying that as a father, Setsuna thought. And that goes for confessing to a woman who’s not your wife in front of your own daughter too.

“Ha ha ha... Uhhh, we won’t do any good just sitting around here, so why don’t we split the party and go deeper into the temple?” Rion suggested. “I think we’ll be able to find Kel-nii and Mel-nee there.”

“Yeah, I think my mother will be there too,” said Sylvia.

“Then we’ll stay back and protect the Oracle. That’s the job of a good man, after all,” Touya agreed.

“We are good at defending...” Miyabi added.

In the end, it was decided that Rion, Setsuna, Sylvia, and Ema would proceed into the temple that Serge was protecting while everyone else would stay and await Efil.

Chapter 2: Godslaying

Final sacred area—the Cradle:

This place strongly resembled the Great Cathedral of Deramis on the lowest level of the Catacombs of Heroic Spirits. It gave off a very mystical impression, as it overflowed with Holy Magic. The scenery inside seemed to lack reality, as if anyone looking at it were dreaming.

The building had been made as a copy of the Great Cathedral, but the ceiling opened up to an expansive false blue sky with a golden sun far overhead. The sun was very vivid in its depiction, and yet it didn't seem too bright. There were also several floor tiles with raised portions, so that they stuck out of the ground to form a crest. The same held true for the altar in the back of the room.

Holy Magic was made visible here as it gathered towards the altar. It seemed like it was being absorbed into the cradle. Everything looked otherworldly.

“And there's even a stunningly beautiful woman in front of my very eyes. I must be dreaming.”

“No, this is definitely reality. But, you *can* see the work of the gods here and there. They must be using what they got from Elearis. By the way, honey, who were you referring to when you said ‘stunningly beautiful woman’? I'm sure this isn't true, but—”

“But nothing. I obviously meant you! Ha ha ha!”

“Thought so. Hee hee.”

After starting things off with a tasteful Grim Reaper-Goddess conversation, we turned our attention to the figure in front of us. Right in front of the altar stood the former Oracle of Deramis, now the leading Apostle and Arbitrator of a god, Iris Deramilius. She had silver hair so long it seemed like it would touch the floor, spotless looks featuring underlying white and silver colors, and a general air similar to that of Colette when she was carrying out her duties as Oracle.

“I suppose I should start with a ‘nice to meet you’? I believe this is our first time meeting. Kelvin Celsius, Apostle of Melfina...do you believe in God?”

Oh. I wouldn't have expected her to try to recruit me to her religion on top of ignoring our tropey mood-breaking conversation. This Arbitrator's good.

“Yeah, ‘nice to meet you’ sounds right. If you're talking about gods of feasting, there's one right here.” *Why not fit in one more jab?* I

though as I patted Mel on the shoulder.

“Heh heh!”

Wow, what’re you acting all proud for? Do you actually like that title?

“But what do you mean, ‘Apostle of Melfina’? Mel is my companion, but I don’t remember becoming her believer or anything like that.”

“I’m your wife, honey! Not your companion, your wife!”

Iris was utterly stone-faced. *Oh no, she’s the type to force seriousness into a situation. Please just shut up, Goddess. She’s not the type of person this will work on!*

“Whether she is a companion or a wife or you’re her believer, it’s all the same. All that matters is how useful you will be in reviving Elearis-sama. Even among the Apostles, the only true believers would be Selector and me. I will also add that faith is not something that is forced, but something that has to come earnestly from the heart. I do not associate my reviving Elearis-sama with everything else.”

“Well, you’re right that Jildora and Bell don’t seem like the type, at the very least. So you just baited them with the promise of some sort of boon once the ritual succeeds?”

“Yes, you could say our relationship was purely business. I spent a lot of effort wrangling them into a cohesive group. Luckily, I succeeded in gaining a Unique Skill, Guiding Hand of the Savior. After listening to each of their desires, their subsequent work would serve as recompense. By doing this obvious thing, all the Apostles moved towards the same goal.”

“So you gave the Apostles absolute orders and those who succeeded would ultimately have their wishes granted?”

“Oh, did you hear that from Assassin or Condemner? Then you should have some idea of my ability. Yes, you’re right; Guiding Hand of the Savior is a form of contract with work being the payment. It is my power as Arbitrator that will affect the world and absolutely fulfill any agreement as long as it is within Elearis-sama’s sphere of influence. The Ten Divine Fingers gave me this ability. Those who believe will be saved. Yes... Yes! That is how it should be!” Iris entwined her hands together in prayer.

“Even if that wish were to be...awfully ruinous?”

“No need to worry about that. As Arbitrator, I take it upon myself to do due diligence in these matters. Of course, all the Apostles’ wishes are good in nature. Whether that be the desire to protect their homeland, protect a loved one, meet their fated partner, or wanting a young and pretty apprentice...they’re all beautiful wishes anybody would make.”

Uh, sure? The latter half of that list sounds real vulgar, though, doesn’t it? What kind of perverted old man wished for those?

“Well, all that will only go into effect once Elearis-sama is revived. Thanks to that, however, we’ve all but finished our goals. The day the Apostles’ pure wishes will be granted is near. By the way, Goddess Melfina, it seems you’ve been enjoying the mortal realm immensely. It is also rare to see the divine allowing their personal feelings to affect things. Since you’ve spent so long here ignoring your heavenly duties anyway, why not cede your seat of office to someone else while you’re at it? You’ll be able to enjoy yourself in this world as much as you like that way, and my goals will be achieved without any bloodshed.”

“That does sound appealing. But I am simply in the middle of a vacation using paid leave. I am here through legitimate channels, so not enjoying it would be a waste, wouldn’t it? Still, if not for the fact that you want to replace me with Elearis, we could have negotiated a little. I have found my beloved husband, after all,” Melfina replied, grasping my hand.

“Meaning? Oh, no need to worry about that. The state this place is in makes it part mortal realm and part realm of the gods. In all likelihood, you will not be barred from saying anything as you would normally be in your artificial body. Yes, as you suspect, I wanted to have an honest conversation with you, the one who ousted Elearis-sama from her rightful place!”

Hm, Iris’s eyes kind of remind me of when Colette’s going wild and delusional. Her true nature might just be that of a zealot, even though she acts reasonable.

I couldn’t help but feel a little shaken as I was reminded of the many indelible scars left on my heart.

No, wait, I think I might be focusing on the wrong thing. She said that this place is part our world and part world of the gods, didn’t she? If Mel’s body can talk here, then Iris was probably telling the truth. I stayed silent, waiting for Melfina to reply.

“Every deity, no matter how majestic and full of love they are, will be replaced by another after spending a dizzyingly long time at their post. Why? Because even though a deity’s body is immutable, their mind is not. One world’s god spent too much time as its deity and began playing with his domain for pleasure. He started to look at the world under his management and the lives within it as the board and pieces of a game, so he fanned the flames of conflict between countries by granting incredible power to deviants or persistently interfering himself. As a result, he brought the world to ruin and had to be replaced. There are more than just one or two examples of this. That is why a deity’s duties always come to an end before that happens.”

“And you claim that Elearis-sama fits that description?”

“She made the Divine Pillars, a system that was put in place to

protect the world, go berserk, plunging everything into chaos. That was the opportunity the angels needed to select the next deity, which was me. Is that not a good enough reason for you?”

“Not good enough? Yes, that’s exactly right. Elearis-sama raised the Divine Pillars because she thought it was needed. There was no sign at all, not even a hint, that they would destroy the world! I’m sure that she was tricked, betrayed, trapped! Yes, it must be so! That is why I became the Arbitrator, to lead the world back to its rightful course! Kelvin, who do you think is right here?”

The look in Iris’s eyes had become that of Colette’s when she was going into a religious frenzy. *Elearis may have been in the same state. Will it happen to Melfina and Colette as well if Melfina goes down the wrong path? Hm, I guess now’s not the time for these thoughts.*

“Ah, no need to ask that. My position has been clear from the beginning. What I want to ask is...whether you’re strong or not, Iris. You’re a demigod, if I recall? That’s great. Why not play with me a while?”

“Honey, the way you phrased that, as if you’re stopping a girl on the street, is a problem. You sounded like some cheap playboy trying to pick up women! As your wife, I cannot allow that!”

Meanwhile, Iris shook her head dejectedly. “In other words, you intend to side with Melfina? That’s too bad. Elearis-sama has a high opinion of you. But in the end, you are Melfina’s apostle. Though we may both wish for peace, our fates pry the paths we must walk apart. However, your death will not be in vain, Kelvin. Your noble soul will once again be reincarnated, next time as one who can see the wonderful qualities of Elearis-sama.”

Oh crap, neither of these goddess factions listens to others. If Iris one-sidedly reincarnates people, wouldn’t that count as a sort of brainwashing? I thought I was getting used to Colette, but zealots are still damn scary! There isn’t an ounce of hesitation showing in those crazed eyes! Man, those thought processes are something that I, as an average citizen, will never understand. Let’s just move this conversation along.

“That’s why I said there was no need. Either way, you’ll need to kill me to reincarnate me, won’t you? So the process is gonna be the same even if the goal is different. Now then, ready your weapon, Arbitrator!”

“Hee hee, you still intend to fight even knowing I am a demigod? Fine. It will be amusing to see how far your faith can carry you and Melfina, who is incomplete thanks to her artificial body.”

As Iris faintly laughed, bluish-white magic erupted from the altar along with an accompanying rumble. *No, wait, it’s transforming?* A keyboard and metal pipes emerged from inside.

“That’s...a pipe organ?”

“Yes, it is. This is the Great Cathedral; it’s only natural for there to be an organ, no? Well, I do admit it is a bit big.”

It wasn’t just “big.” This was the first time I’d ever seen an instrument so large that wasn’t on the screen of a television or in a picture. The grand piano Sera had bought on a whim didn’t even compare. It was large enough to monopolize an entire wall of this holy space. The pipes seem to reach all the way up into the heavens, and the keyboard was big enough to need several levels stacked on top of each other. It clearly wasn’t meant to be played by a single person.

“This altar exists to strengthen the link between Elearis-sama and me. Originally, I would send my magic to the cradle through it, but it can also do this.” Iris gently raised her hand and started to play the pipe organ behind her by herself. Every time a note sounded, heavy enough that it seemed to shake my very soul, bluish-white magic was expelled from the metal pipes. As that realization dawned on me, the magic gathered around Iris’s back and above her head.

“Is that some sort of show of respect for me or something?”

“No, it has nothing to do with you. It is simply proof of my faith.”

Iris now looked like an angel...exactly like Melfina did when she manifested her halo and wings. She was using Holy Magic to create her wings and such, and they gave off a mystical brilliance that certainly seemed familiar. Melfina looked somewhat miffed upon seeing her traits being copied that way.

“O Goddess, I pray that I may be able to borrow your blade.”

But it seemed like Iris was still in the middle of her transformation. She clasped her hands together in prayer, this time summoning two flying objects from the heavens. They were Elearis’s favorite polearm, Holy Lance Eclipse, and a divine instrument, Black Grimoire.

The lance had much more magic within it compared to the last time I’d seen it, and the cover of Black Grimoire had turned inexplicably white. Really, it should’ve been named White Grimoire instead.

Both pieces moved to Iris as if they were being sucked in by some inexorable force, eventually winding up in her hands just as her prayer started to cause them to shine.

“How strange. Kelvin is one thing, but I expected Melfina to attack me during that.”

“It seems like you still don’t understand. Being a wife means supporting your husband. As a goddess who plans to be an excellent wife, I would never do something as ruthless as that. It doesn’t change the fact that we’ll knock you flat in the end, though.”

Probably out of a sense of rivalry, Mel manifested her halo and

wings, which she normally kept hidden. With Holy Lance Luminary in hand, she fully shifted into battle mode. *She's gotta be feeling real serious about this on the inside. Not that I'm going to object to that, of course.*

"Boreas Death Scythe!"

I created a large scythe out of my Black Staff of Disaster. I also slapped some support magic onto Mel and myself. *Now then, that's it for the usual prep. A demigod, huh? Heh...*

"Have you finished your prayers? I can wait more if you'd like."

"That's not something you should say to a bona fide goddess. We'll take those words and flip them right back at you."

"Hey, we're all ready now, right? It'd be rude to keep a guest waiting any longer."

"You're right about that. Then—"

The reverberations that had been sounding from the organ abruptly stopped, returning the sanctuary to silence. We stood there, facing off against each other with weapons in hand, and I couldn't prevent a smile from forming on my face—one that mostly involved the tilting of the corners of my mouth.

"Let's enjoy this fight!"

"Your character overlaps too much with mine!"

"I will have you vacate your seat, false god!"

We all shouted our cries and convictions, and the battle I'd been waiting for all this time finally started. *I gotta aim for the organ first, obviously!*

"You know, that thing's just begging me to hit it!"

Having concentrated raging wind into a blade that could slice through anything, I blasted it towards the pipe organ behind Iris. If that was the tool that connected Iris to Elearis, then I reasoned it would trouble her if I destroyed it. The attack was meant to be both a greeting and a probe of her abilities, but I didn't hold back. With all my buffs, I would never miss, and she couldn't move the organ out of the way. Not to mention, Iris was also in the path I'd chosen to fly off in. *Now then, how will she react?*

"Arcadia," Iris declared as she flapped her blue wings, dodging my blade and ascending into the air. I was only eyeballing it, but she looked to be really fast. The spell she intoned was, by my recollection, an esoteric Oracle technique that Colette had used before.

Mel! I called through the Network.

::Of course!::

The two of us chased after Iris, me using Fly and Melfina her wings. Immediately afterwards, Boreas Death Scythe's blade hit the organ. There seemed to be nothing in particular stopping it, and the scythe of wind easily bisected the instrument in the middle.

Or at least, I thought it did. Looking back, I noticed the pipe organ was completely unharmed. Rather than it having recovered from the damage, it looked more like it had rewound time so that the attack had never happened. My mind raced back to a mock battle I had once had with Sylvia.

Is that Colette's ability to nullify fatal blows? I asked. *I'm pretty sure you can apply it to objects as well.*

::But it only works once. If you attack a second or third time, it will definitely be possible to destroy whatever was protected. At least, that's what I'd like to say, but it looks like the organ has several techniques worked into it. They shouldn't be able to stack like that, but...there's no point overthinking it now. She must have used it lovingly for a long time during her tenure as an Apostle; I'm sure she spent a long time preparing.::

Then it looks like we need to aim for Iris first, I answered. *Still, I can't stop the feeling that she's trying to get us to target her for some reason.*

::It could be a bluff, since she dared to cast her Oracle spells right in front of us.::

Well, since she's gone to the trouble of inviting us, let's accept!

Leaving the organ alone for the moment, I chased Iris up into the refreshingly vast stretch of space in which the blue sky was depicted. There was nowhere to hide here, only a beautiful but not-too-bright sun. Iris was already right in front of me, so I braced my scythe as Mel readied her lance.

"Oasis." Just before I swung my weapon, Iris disappeared.

::Oasis—it's a stealth barrier that masks the presence of all inside it. Be careful.::

Man, those esoteric Oracle techniques sure are a pain when they're used by an enemy...



I concentrated, trying to be wary of my surroundings. Just like with Colette, if I were to make a single noise, I would most likely be immediately found out. But it was very likely that I would be targeted by at least one surprise attack in this situation. I was facing a raging zealot who would do anything for the deity she worshipped. If at all possible, I didn't want to actually get hit by her.

I paused and asked Melfina, *Hmmm? Does the barrier stop us from communicating with the outside?* I was about to consult Ange for a good way to smoke Iris out, but I was stopped by some sort of wall. I was also unable to Summon any Followers, so apparently, it was utterly impossible to communicate through the barrier.

So it's like that barrier back in Gaun.

::Seems like it. However, it's a little too big.::

The barrier used by Bell and Ange back in Gaun's arena had clearly been visible as a purple wall. That wasn't the case this time, though. In the first place, I couldn't really tell how big the space demarcated by the barrier was. If you excluded the Great Cathedral below, all I could see was the blue sky painted around this space. *Goddamn, it's like I've been abandoned in the middle of the ocean.*

Say, there's no reason to be considerate or hold back here, right? I asked.

::Ahh, I see what you're getting at. That solution's so like you. This wouldn't fly aboveground, though::

Though we could no longer see or otherwise sense Iris, she hadn't disappeared completely. If we couldn't detect her, we just had to create a situation where she was forced to show herself. *Hey, Iris, if you don't hurry up and get out here, it's going to be terrible, you know?*

"Subsidence Quake, Tempest Barrier 3X."

From the Great Cathedral below me to the blue sky that surrounded me above it, everything within my field of vision started to shake as I unleashed my spell. Some places crushed and deformed into irregular shapes like putty, while others simply collapsed. It seemed that my surroundings were definitely backed by earth, as the sky continuously cracked, creating a strange sight that seemed as if the ground were leaking out of the air.

Of course, the section that the pipe organ rested on was no exception. The wall there collapsed as the wavering ground swallowed up the instrument.

As a follow-up, I also created tornadoes large enough to swallow an entire town. They picked up the rubble and dirt left by the collapsing earth and turned the area into a blender that ripped things from the ground and sent them into the sky. I had actually splurged and created three of these seemingly world-ending twisters.

Such gale-force winds were something that no one would normally ever get to witness, but I felt no need to hold back here in a sanctuary created by and for Iris. *I've been controlling myself all this time while everyone else got to enjoy their battles. I'm gonna use my magic to the fullest!*

Uh...I might have gone too far.

::A true natural disaster. I should have expected as much from someone holding the title of 'Magical Idiot.'::

Melfina was right. This was the first time I'd ever used such an exorbitant amount of magic at once...and the scenery that had, until recently, looked heavenly was turning into a wretched view of pandemonium before my eyes. What was most ironic was that throughout all this, the painted sky still looked wonderfully blue.

Still, I'd gone so far that I'd actually managed to creep myself out.

I didn't care much about sacredness or anything like that, but Iris, being a devout believer, wouldn't be able to stay silent after seeing her sanctuary destroyed so thoroughly that it made even me take a step back. *How do you like that?* I couldn't help saying in my mind, but...

Come on now... I grumbled to Melfina.

::It seems those esoteric Oracle techniques weren't just on the organ::

The entire Great Cathedral regenerated time and time again, no matter how many times it was turned to nothing but rubble and scrap. It didn't matter how devastating the blow was, everything returned to its original form without fail. *Did Iris really apply her technique to the entire cathedral and not just the pipe organ?*

"The Oracle of Deramis did not originally possess such massive amounts of magic," Iris announced. "That was a measure to ensure they could not use too many powerful techniques, as well as a show of self-admonition. Even though I have become a demigod, I am still the same."

I could hear her voice from somewhere. After searching, I sensed that she was above us, using that strange sun's light to hide herself. She had placed herself high up in a location not even the tornado could reach.

The instant Mel and I knew where Iris was, we rushed at her with all the speed we could muster.

"But as long as I have this book, I can share in its inexhaustible supply of magic and no longer need to worry about running out. Thanks to Condemner becoming the Demon Lord, this book has been charged with excess power. Yes, it was truly a good deed; she will surely be saved."

We had already covered half the distance between us. I was still listening to Iris as she talked, but she wasn't offering anything new in terms of information. As expected, Black Grimoire was basically a tank to store magic in, and I was actually relieved that Iris hadn't run herself out to the point of hurling rainbows from her mouth.

"Finally, I have obtained an esoteric technique that no Oracle before me ever did. No matter how much you try to destroy it, this Great Cathedral will never break. I, as the Oracle, will never be shamed—all for Elearis-sama!"

Just as we were a few seconds away from reaching her, Iris stuck out Holy Lance Eclipse in front of her. *Huh? What? What's she doing? Something fun?* My thoughts ran amok every time my brain filled itself with its own version of a drug.

"Arkas Tabarna."

It was a sphere. More specifically, a spherical barrier. It

swallowed Mel and me whole, forming a semitransparent white barrier around us. Then, many bands crammed with symbols that seemed to be from some ancient language wrapped snugly around the sphere, constricting it.

Creeeeaaakk.

Every time the strange strings bit into the sphere, the barrier surrounding us shrank.

“Do you really think you’ve trapped us?”

“Yes, I do.”

I used Boreas Death Scythe to cut through the barrier. The sphere was instantly broken, and the strings snapped as they were flung away. Then, the entire thing rewound into its original state as if nothing had ever happened. *Ahh, I see. I kind of expected that to be the case.*

“If not for your scythe that ignores all laws, Tabernacle would be an indestructible barrier. And I applied a barrier like Arcadia to it, just like with the Great Cathedral. With the properties of both those barriers, Arkas Tabarna is completely unbreakable. As long as I can power it, it will repair itself infinitely. This sanctuary full of contradiction will continue to shrink, and all that awaits the two of you is death, destruction, and collapse. Ah, what a cruel end it will be! But I will not stay my hand. Everything I do is for the Goddess and to bring peace upon this world. Eclipse, shift to Holy Extermination Form. Charge MP.”

The barrier surrounding us, which was gradually shrinking, was not a problem. However, Iris’s holy lance starting to emit a bright bluish-white light and fierce spinning sounds was another matter entirely. Her halo and wings responded to the lance, shining so brightly it was almost blinding.

Ahh, I know that too. It’s a superweapon from the age of the gods. It’s similar to Melfina’s Holy Lance Luminary, so Mel was right. Iris is totally copying her. Oh, whoops. Now’s not the time to make jokes, is it?

“Even if by some cosmic fluke you manage to slip out of Arkas Tabarna, I will instantly bring the judgment of the divine upon you. Of course, I won’t do anything like rip you two lovers from each other. You will both disappear together.”

The shrinking barrier had already gotten small enough that it was touching the tip of Mel’s polearm.



Mel, leave your back to me; I’ll do something!

::I trust you!::

After that telepathic exchange, we stuck our backs together as tightly as possible to create space. According to Iris, the walls closing

in on us were impervious to attacks that were powerful but had no other properties. And even if I did break it, the barrier would simply reverse time and regenerate itself. I used Parallel Processing to try and think of a way out.

Oh, that's an idea.

"Rubber Counter!"

A rubberlike wind deployed around us as we stuck together. Since there was so little space, its properties became even stronger in its limited area, and it pushed back against the pressure from the outside. *It can't break the barrier? But the fact that it shrinks means we can stretch it out by pushing it.*

The more the bands that Iris had put on the outside of the walls constricted, the more powerfully my Rubber Counter spell pushed back. I decided not to be conservative with my MP, adding more rubber winds, then more, and then more still, increasing the density of my magic wind. The walls, which had until now been nearly upon us, were now swollen like a balloon about to burst.

"That's Condemner's—"

"Yeah. A lot happened, so I had her teach me. As you know, these winds are very annoying."

Iris had no reply.

"Well, that still doesn't break your barrier here. You're right; there's no breaking it with anything other than my scythe. But still, crushing us to death is off the table now. I just need to do something about your holy lance and everything'll be fine, but...the fact that you haven't attacked us with it yet means you can't break this barrier either, doesn't it?"

With the Rubber Counter between us, I laughingly pointed at her barrier. Iris herself did not react; she simply stood there, spinning her divine lance while emitting a bright light.

"Right, at this rate we'll just be wasting time staring at each other. Why not get rid of this thing so we can make this a straightforward, easy-to-understand punch-out?"

"I refuse. I'll say this now: I'm fine with waiting a few days for Melfina to starve to death. Even if you have some supplies on you or in Storage, with Melfina by your side, they won't last for more than a few days. Compared to me, with my nearly infinite MP, your limited stock of food makes your situation very different. Indeed, this is the only way to bring a peaceful end to this conflict. Do not worry, I will at least serve as a conversation partner, so your death will not be a lonely one."

Both Mel and I were speechless.

Whaaat? That's your plan?! I've been through quite a lot of battles myself, but this is the first time I've ever witnessed someone switch to trying

to starve their opponent out in the middle of a fight! I mean, it's true there's a ton of food prepared by Efil in Clotho's Storage, but if we leave out the stuff that hasn't been cooked yet, it's still very limited. Considering the state of Melfina's stomach lately, even holding out for a few days will be tough. As proof, I can tell Mel was incredibly shaken by that statement. There's also the matter of our other bodily functions... No, even putting all that aside, I won't let this happen!

"Do you really expect me to allow such a boring fight to happen?"

"I don't need your permission. This is already decided. It's fate. Just accept it."

"Fate, huh? That's not something that someone who's still got their weapon at the ready just in case should be saying."

It seemed that Iris had no reply to that.

Assuming that being chatty to shake up her mental state is a fundamental tactic for the moment, what should I do now? The only methods I can think of are:

1. Continue to forcibly widen the barrier and conversely take up more space, crushing Iris in the process. This should be possible as long as my MP lasts, but I haven't figured out how large this space is yet. Aiming for this just isn't realistic.

2. Have everyone else rush over to help once they've finished their own fights. But I personally don't want to have to do this. I mean, it would be boring for me; I wouldn't be able to have my fill! Judging from the fact that Iris doesn't seem to be particularly rushed, it's clear that she's done something to make it impossible to get here from the outside. This idea is rejected.

3. Now is the time to unleash my hidden power.

Yeah, that's the most realistic option...

::Honey?::

Lend me your ear for a moment, Mel.

I whispered my idea into her ear. Not that there was a need for it, since it could've been done through telepathy. I chose option three.

"Hey come on, Iris. Do you really intend to keep this stalemate going? You need to eat too, along with everything else that comes with having a physical body, don't you?"

"Put your mind at ease. The Oracle of Deramis possesses a will of steel in order to offer her faith to the Goddess. Trifles such as fasting or excretion need not be considered."

T-Trifles? I'd rather not think about the specifics, but I'm sure that's not a good stance to have. Even with a will of steel, there are limits. Even other deviants have a line... Right, I need to have a talk with Colette when I get back.

"Too bad, then. We can't afford to keep humoring you. We're going to force our way out!" With that, I released the power I'd been

putting into Rubber Counter. Iris's barrier was pushed back, and the sphere grew steadily larger.

"I wondered what you were going to do, but forcing it to expand will accomplish nothing. The Arkas Tabarna is unbreakable; do you not understand that yet?"

"Nope, I get it! But having a larger target is better, don't you agree?"

"What?"

Unsummon, Resummon. Of course, the designated area for that Summoning was behind Iris.

"Indeed," Mel added. "Thanks to that, it is very easy to hit. Luminary, shift to Holy Extermination Form. Charge MP."

Iris let out a shocked gasp. *Now that's just plain careless of you. Or did you let your guard down because you've isolated this sanctuary? This unbreakable barrier of yours doesn't stop my summoning abilities. So, putting me aside, I can just Resummon my Follower Melfina outside.* And once that was done, what Melfina had to do was clear: launch a single strike with her lance, motivated by the desire to take back what made her unique.

"Luminary Burst!"

"Grkhh! Eclipse Burst!"

In response to the huge beam that Melfina shot out, Iris quickly turned around and fired her own. Miraculously, both beams were of the same strength. However, Melfina had the clear upper hand since she'd shot hers first. The starlight being unleashed by her polearm pushed back Iris's beam at full power, gradually forcing her backwards.

"Sup. Welcome to the bubble."

"Kelvin!"

What was waiting for Iris was the barrier I had worked so hard to expand. Even though it had gotten larger, it was still just as strong and showed no sign of breaking. *Damn, what a troublesome barrier.* But now Iris was trapped between her own barrier and Mel's attack. *What will you do now? You're gonna get crushed if you don't act!*

"Wouldn't it be better to just undo this barrier? I think it'd be much better to face the destroyable wall that is me rather than this indestructible sphere of yours. Then, once you do something about that attack of Mel's, we can start our wonderful round two!"

"Heh... Heh heh... Truly the tempting whispers of a Grim Reaper!"

The barrier had been a bad move, but trying to keep Melfina from eating was even worse. Thanks to that, our number one glutton, Mel, had instantly shifted to high gear. The power behind her attack exceeded that of the one she'd previously unleashed while trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Yes... I see... That might...be a good idea!” Iris finally muttered once she’d been pushed back enough by Mel’s attack to be touching the sphere with her feet.

“What, really?” My hopes swelled just like the barrier until—

“Tabernacle.”

“Huh?!”

But then Iris placed another barrier around Mel before turning her weapon around, sweeping at me with the beam coming out of it. Just before it hit me, she undid the unbreakable barrier I was trapped in, forcing me to take her attack.

The unbreakable barrier had been removed, and that was good. But, as things were, I would be taking a giant beam to the face. I currently had multiple layers of Rubber Counter in place around me. Back when Bell had used it in the Demon Lord’s castle, it had managed to turn away both Efil’s Incendiary Arrow and Mdofarak’s Sagittarius. However, that was only because they’d been weakened thanks to Bell’s ability to shave away a target’s power. I had no such trick up my sleeve, so I had no choice but to try to endure and outlast Iris’s beam of light.

Assume it’s as powerful as Mel’s full-power Luminary Burst. Think back on our mock battles. I need to try and get through this bit of danger by defending!

Nope, impossible, I announced to Mel. Her attack was something that was almost impossible to face head-on unless you used an Oracle’s unbreakable barrier or were gifted with insane luck like Serge.

Having neither of those things, trying to endure the attack with just Rubber Counter was fundamentally impossible. More than anything, pure defense was not my style. None of those options were in the cards, and I couldn’t defend, so the only choice was to go forward!

“Boreas Death Scythe!”

I formed a storm blade around my scythe and sent it flying. The Grim Reaper’s scythe, capable of slicing through anything in creation, ripped through my Rubber Counter on the way to clashing with the light of the heavens.

“What blasphemy!”

“It doesn’t matter whether they’re gods or anything else; those who lose are at fault!”

My scythe’s job had never changed. Its purpose was to chew through those who opposed me and bring me victory against all comers. The storm blade that I’d unleashed split the gigantic beam down the middle as it continued forward unabated. I followed my blade as it created a path for me, closing in on Iris and her holy lance.

However, I didn't want to charge in only to be trapped by another unbreakable barrier. So I decided that now was the time, while I had Iris's attention.

"Hey now, is this all your faith amounts to? It looks like the current Oracle, Colette, is way more 'devoted' than you are, you know? What a letdown."

"You dare imply that my faith is lacking?! What arrogance!"

Once again, I Unsummoned Mel only to Resummon her behind Iris, who had continued attacking. *Man, this Oracle's really easy to taunt. Her buttons are all out in the open.* Thanks to that, Mel's surprise attack worked.

"Mel...fina!" Having been hit by Mel's lance from behind, Iris fell towards me.

"Honey!"

"I got you!"

I bet it's rare for a saint to descend, like, this many times in a single day. The first time, she'd come down to crush us to death in an honestly lukewarm response, but that wouldn't happen again. Iris was flapping her shining wings in an attempt to control the speed of her fall, but she was too late for that too.

"Ga...aarggh!"

My scythe slipped through her belly, and on the return, I swiped down at her halo. Her entrails flew as I dealt her certain death.

"Of course she'd rewind that..."

The sight of Iris recreating herself after being neatly split in four was something I was used to by now. The blood and entrails that had sprayed everywhere all returned inside of her as her pieces stitched together again. Like it was nothing, she cast a technique on herself to make it as if that fatal blow had never happened. Of course she'd be able to do the same thing to herself that she'd done to both the barrier that had trapped me and the entire Great Cathedral.

"Tsk, it's no use! As long as I hold faith in the connection between the Goddess and me, I can infinitely—"

"Salvation Ray."

Iris was interrupted by a destructive light raining down from above. It was the same rain of light used by a former Apostle, Estoria. This attack, launched immediately after I'd cut her apart, swallowed Iris whole. *How ironic for someone who promises salvation to be destroyed by the light of salvation.*

Of course, I'd considered the possibility that the saint would regenerate. All this was just to confirm that. Now that we knew for sure, our next play would show itself naturally. Rather, this was something like a rehash from that old guy, Nito. Even if we used the same tactic again, the counters would naturally adapt as well.

“Grrk! You... Taberna—”

“As if I’d let you!”

I made sure to leave a gap large enough for a single person in the rain of light so that I could attack through it. I sliced her mouth apart with my scythe before she could create any more bothersome barriers.

Iris forced out a shocked gurgle through her missing jaw. Though her face flew through the air, she still managed to recover. I locked eyes with her as it was happening, and I got the feeling that she was glaring at me particularly hard. *You shouldn’t do that as a saint, you know? You need to be more fanatical, like the zealot you are. Oh well. This is still the end.*

The esoteric Oracle technique to evade fatal blows wasn’t something that happened instantly. The subject still had to reattach all their lost parts, so there was a small time lag as all the scattered bits came back. While that was happening, we ended our long time in the air and returned to the ground.

“Time for the nostalgic return to the Great Cathedral.”

Iris made no reply as we touched down on the floor of our starting point, the Great Cathedral. She had been sent down ahead of us, and thanks to Mel’s magic, she was completely frozen. Since her mouth was also locked shut, she couldn’t have said anything anyway. I also restrained her with a cast of Glory Sanctuary, a sealing spell. The point was to render her powerless without killing her.

We seized Holy Lance Eclipse and Black Grimoire as well. *Oh wait, I guess it’s White Grimoire now.* On top of that, we shut off Iris’s MP supply coming from the pipe organ-shaped altar by freezing the metal pipes. That probably had an effect, as the halo and wings Iris had previously boasted disappeared. With all that done, she could only glare at us resentfully.

“That should deal with her. She’s tied up with sealing chains, so she shouldn’t be able to use magic or her esoteric techniques. Not that she could chant in the first place.”

“All that’s left is the cradle she so lovingly enshrined in the altar.”

The pipe organ was almost completely covered in ice. At the top of its stupidly large structure was the cradle that probably had something to do with Elearis’s revival. It was unmistakably what Ange and Bell had told us about, what Iris always kept by her side.

“Destroying it would be fastest, but are you okay with that? What if there’s, like, a baby inside that’ll become a god?” I asked.

“I took a peek when we were in the air before, and there was nothing inside. Either way, destroying it will deal a blow to the Apostles.”

“That settles things, then. We’ve stopped the MP supply to Iris from White Grimoire and the organ, so as things stand, it should only

be able to rewind once more at most. I'll just use my scythe and—"

Ft... Ftssss.

Suddenly, a noise rang in my ears. It was the sound of TV static, something that should not exist here.

Ftssssss— [Finally... Finally! Since that day...] Ftssssss— [how many months and years have...] Ftss—

The white noise gradually receded, giving way to a woman's voice that carried directly into my ears. *That voice... Where did—*

[Are you enjoying it, honey? Yes, I know. There's no need to say it. The never-ending battles, polishing yourself to the extreme and reaching the pinnacle... I won't let you down next time. I won't let any gods or anything else stop us. Please, enjoy it as much as you like.]

That's right, this voice is the girl I hear faintly in my dreams. But...still, this voice...it's almost—

::Honey?::

Having seen me suddenly freeze, Mel peered at my face, concerned. *Ahh, I knew it. That voice is—*

[The MP that Condemner left in the book is at its limit, so it's time to wrap things up. Iris... No, Elearis...though that may be a false body, you still served me well. Rest now. Thank you for guiding me this far, me. No, Melfina. From now on, I will take over the position of the Goddess of Reincarnation.]

There were no prior signs, and I couldn't feel any stirrings of magic. Time seemed to stop. The two holy lances, Luminary and Eclipse, moved. Then, with no hesitation, they pierced through the hearts of Melfina and Iris.



"Gah..."

"Hhrrk...?!"

The ice around Iris melted as Mel, who had just been worrying over me, collapsed. The holy lances, weapons used by deities, were stabbed through the left sides of their chests. That was when I finally felt time, which had been intensely compressed so that everything was moving slowly, start to flow again.

I immediately ran to Mel's side, somehow managing to catch her before she fell to the ground.

Just breathe, Mel. I'll take the lance out while healing you with White Magic!

I started without waiting for Mel's reply, placing my hands on Holy Lance Luminary. *If I rip it out all at once, I can instantly plug the hole to stop any bleeding, and I can also repair her damaged organs. So get out! Leave her body already! Pull out now!*

However, as if to spite my will, the lance refused to budge. No

matter how hard I tried, it refused to leave her body, as if it were being kept there by something with twice my strength.

::This is...my power? It's absorbing...it?::

Hey! Keep it together! I encouraged her through the Network.

I detected a flow of what looked like magic leaving her body. *Is the holy lance absorbing her power?* I tried to confirm with Analyze Eye. *What the hell is this?* Melfina's stats were dropping through the floor. *The numbers—they're plummeting. Even her skills are graying out before disappearing entirely! And the hidden skill Divine Binding is plainly there, and in red, even, as if it's trying to draw attention to itself.*

That disappeared too?! I cried out telepathically.

In the end, even the skill in red turned gray, as if to say it had fulfilled its duty. *It's fading... Ahhh, it disappeared...!*

There wasn't even a shade left of Melfina's stats, which had numbered in the thousands. Each one was now a lonely 1. *At this rate, even if I managed to take out the lance...*

[Yes, she'd probably die. But there's nothing else for it. After all, she's fulfilled her duty.]

Once again, that voice reverberated through my head. *What the hell are you?! Why are you talking to me in that voice? Why are you laughing?!*

[Oh, my apologies. That was rude of me. I was just enjoying talking with you so much, honey, that I couldn't help it. Also, I have yet to gain a physical body. However, I can at least talk with you directly now.]

As soon as the mysterious voice said that, a black mist erupted from Luminary, which was still in Mel's body. When I checked, the same thing was happening to Eclipse. The two clumps of mist moved to the cradle on top of the altar and disappeared inside it. A moment later, I felt a strange presence.

"Ahh... Ahhhh... Ahhhh... Oh my, so this is how I manifested. Maybe it's because my revival as a goddess still isn't complete? Hee hee, then I need to go and receive those privileges, don't I?"

Someone rose quietly from the cradle. The voice I heard was different from the voice that had been bouncing around inside my head. Actually, rather than being different, it was more like it had gotten younger.

Ahh, I see. I was right. The figure that got out of the cradle was garbed in light armor colored black, like the inverse of Melfina's. Likewise, she had black wings and a black halo, while her hair was gray. Even so, its length was the spitting image of Melfina's. Not only that, but she looked like Melfina as well, though she was clearly younger. *Aghh, dammit. It's almost as if—*

"This is our first meeting in this world, isn't it, honey? Once again,

it is a pleasure to meet you. I am the combination of all the dark aspects of Melfina's heart. Let's see, you can call me Dark Melfina, or DarkMel."

She's exactly like a young Melfina.

"DarkMel?! What are you saying?!"

"It's only natural for you to be surprised. Personally, I would love to walk you through it slowly and thoroughly, but...it looks like we don't have enough time, honey."

The black Melfina, DarkMel, smiled innocently like a child who had just pulled off a great prank, but her smile also held the cruelty of a child who played around with corpses.

"Hee hee, don't make that face. You're making me want to eat you up like a snack!"

"If you're really Mel, then it won't end with just 'a snack.'"

"You're right about that. I'm not confident I can control myself in that respect either. That's why I'll refrain. Don't worry, I've already waited hundreds, thousands of years! I can wait; I'm patient. We'll just talk a little today."



This time, DarkMel put on a bewitching smile. *Oh no, this is bad. Both her abilities and her personality are hitting all of my buttons.*

"In deference to your devotion in continuing to heal the white me even while she's in that state, I'll get straight to the point. When I, Melfina, took my current position, I was split into light and dark halves. I am the half that governs her darker emotions. I suppose you could also refer to them as the emotions she threw away?"

I was so shocked that it took me a moment to formulate a response. "What?" *She was...split in two when she became the Goddess of Reincarnation? What is she talking about?*

"It seems that the white me has completely forgotten her goal in becoming the Goddess, but that's not a big deal. Even if she didn't mean to, she still managed to carry that artificial body made out of that vile Elearis's flesh all the way here. Don't you find it hilarious that I had Elearis's soul reincarnated as that Oracle, Iris? She totally thought she was the Oracle. Hah! Do you hear that, Elearis? Are you still alive? I had a really fun time thanks to you acting out a faith bordering on madness!"

DarkMel laughed scornfully down at Iris (Elearis?), who was limply drooped over. She was revealing so much information in her tirade that even with Parallel Processing, I couldn't keep up. I had my hands full just confirming what was happening in front of me while trying to heal Mel's wounds. Meanwhile, Mel was growing weaker and weaker in my arms.

"Hon...ey...I...never intended...to betray—"

"I know; no need to say it." All I could do was hold her hand tight.

"Oh right, that other me is still alive, isn't she? I can totally feel your love, honey. I know she's trying to clear any doubts through telepathy, and she really didn't mean any harm. I can guarantee that. She was just caught in my plans a little, so, honey, please don't come to hate that white me. Still, your party really does make black look good, doesn't it? I've thought for a long time that this form would be a much better fit."

I had nothing to say in return. *What's DarkMel's goal here? Is she trying to stir up hostility in me? No, I can see she has some sort of expectation for my reaction. Kind of like the petty meanness from when you're young and you can't help but bother the one you like?* I couldn't help but imagine that scenario brought to an extreme.

"Now then, time's almost up. I see they're both still alive even though I sucked up all their power as gods. I should do some cleanup."

DarkMel reached her hand out towards Melfina. It almost looked

like an angel reaching her hand out to save an injured person. However, it was actually a death sentence. That hand might even reap Melfina's soul. *Holy Lance Luminary is responding to DarkMel. As things stand, Mel won't survive!*

"I see, so that's how you respond," DarkMel said flatly. The lance had been about to free itself to fly back to her, but before it could, I Unsummoned Melfina, transferring her into my magic pool. That way, she wouldn't die, at the very least.

"Then what about Elearis? She's not your follower." Once again, DarkMel reached her hand out. Of course, this time she was aiming for—

"I won't let you!"

"Oh?"

A voice rang out from somewhere. At the same time, a horde of holy swords rained down upon the altar that DarkMel had placed herself on. She used Luminary to deflect the rain of blades, which prevented her from accomplishing what she was about to do to Elearis.

Her attacker was Protector Serge Flore. I didn't even have time to fully process the thought "*Why is she here?*" before more arrivals came to my side.

"Are you all right, Kelvin?! You aren't hurt, are you?!"

"Where's Mel-san?!"

It was Sera and Ange.



Serge, with Holy Sword Will in her hands, landed in front of Elearis as she continued to launch more of the same swords floating around her at DarkMel. Once she landed, she stabbed the sword in her hands into the ground to free them up so she could grab Holy Lance Eclipse, which was protruding from Elearis's chest, with one hand. Serge laid her other hand on the bleeding wound in question.

"I'm sure it hurts, but bear with it."

Is it just a difference in stats? It seemed to me that she was easily more powerful than I was. Serge braced herself and pulled the lance out of Elearis. All the blood that was being stopped by the weapon threatened to fountain out in that instant, but the former Hero had cast White Magic at the same time. It was the exact thing I'd been trying to do for Mel, and she was doing it while also attacking DarkMel.

After a moment, Elearis stirred. "Gkhh...urgh...haaghkk..."

"So you've come to. That was close, but I'm glad you're still alive."

"Ser...ge... I..."

“Okay, stop talking. Focusing on healing up.”

Though she was barely conscious, Elearis was still alive. Serge scooped her up in her arms, but it was clear that it was already painful for Elearis to even breathe. In the meantime, the horde of holy swords she'd prepared had almost all been shot at DarkMel, who had deflected each and every one of them so far. Those deflected blades scattered into particles of light.

“You're surprisingly stubborn too, Elearis. Well, I suppose I should have expected that of a mortal reincarnated with a god's soul. Either way, you've lost pretty much all your power as an Oracle as well as the divinity of your soul, so you're no different from a human now. If you would just die like a good girl, everything would be easier for you...”

The holy lance had fallen to the floor after being removed from Elearis's chest. DarkMel made a rather unamused snap, causing the lance to make a beeline for her hands.

“What's going on here, Sera, Ange? Why are you with Serge when she's an enemy?”

“Uhhh, not sure how to put it... Kinda like...the enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

“What?”

“Ha ha ha... Honestly, we're not too sure what's going on either. We were basically forcefully dragged here by Protector...”

The two of them were acting very evasive, but DarkMel was now giving the holy lances in her hands test swings. I made sure not to turn my attention away from her while I looked at Serge for an answer.

“I chose to bring along the ones from your group who were both free and up to par. I'm the only one among the Apostles who's able to get in here, so I brought them because I thought they'd be necessary. You got a problem with that?”

“I do. That's not a reason at all.”

“Not to mention we weren't free!” Sera and Ange shouted in unison.

After a pause, Serge continued, “My goal is simply to resurrect Elearis. I never wanted to give birth to a wicked deity like her. Oh...no, that's not really it. What I actually want to do is protect Iris. That's it. Even if she's just Elearis playing a role, she's still my best friend. It looks to me like it'd be pretty difficult to defeat that thing, even if I were to give it my all. That's why I want to work with you, Kelvin. That's the best way to get Iris out of this situation, isn't it? Look, I even opened the way for those of your friends who fit my instincts, senses, and tastes. Don't complain.”

Once she started talking, Serge wouldn't stop. *Ahh, right, I*

remember. She's chatty, always talking in these situations.

"Uh, yeah, that's about right. The way she worded it to us was much...shorter, though."

"It didn't sound like she was lying, and I knew the Protector wasn't the kind of person to go through roundabout methods like that, so I couldn't help it after hearing about you, Kelvin. Also, there're some documents I want to show you..."

Well, if the two masters of seeing through lies feel this way, I guess there's no reason to doubt it. In truth, I was glad of the reinforcements. I would never have been able to win against DarkMel one-on-one; that was how wide the gap in power between us was. I didn't hate fights like that, but the chances of me winning were as close to zero as you could get. In fact, the chances might actually have been zero.

"So? What's up with her? She Mel's little sister or something?"

"I'll upload everything to the Follower Network, so just read it there. It'll be faster that way."

"Got it— Whaaaat?! Can that really happen?!"

"Uh...hmmm? Then...uhh...what?"

I couldn't really fault them for their reactions. Mel was close to dead, Iris was actually Elearis, and Melfina had an evil heart or something that had given birth to DarkMel. I hadn't really managed to catch up yet myself. There was no reply from Mel, who was in my magic pool, and Elearis was in no state to say anything either. The only one who knew the truth was DarkMel, so there was no choice other than to beat it out of her.

Having waited all this time, the person in question now spoke up. "Oh, are we finally done talking?"

"So you were waiting for us all polite-like. How nice of you."

"Hee hee! That's because I never intended to bring things to a head with you here."

"Huh?"

DarkMel spread her jet-black wings and alighted from the cradle to float in front of us. From there, she cast her eyes over our group once more as she laughed mirthfully.

"Protector went and revealed her identity, so I'll also be honest and tell you what I'm planning. My goal is to be your largest and final enemy, honey. For that, I have spent countless days and hours deceiving even gods, and it is for that reason I live."

"Largest and final...enemy?"

"That's right. Even as I am now, I suspect I would find it easy to destroy all of you, Protector included. But that won't do. That could not possibly be good enough. As the one who will bury you, honey, I cannot allow it to be in this fashion. Only when I fully become a deity will our ideals be realized!"

She wants to become a full-fledged goddess...in order to be a fitting last adversary for me? So, basically, she wants to be stronger than Serge, someone so strong it would be hopeless for me to even try to lay a hand on her. All for me, a battle junkie?

“My priority is saving Iris, so it’d be great if I could just leave now,” Serge commented. “But you won’t be satisfied with that, right, Kelvin? I was the same, after all.”

I needed a moment to mentally catch up before I could reply. “Yeah. If you run, you’ll have to do it while dodging our attacks. There’s no way we’d let you go so easily, given our past.”

I pointed my scythe at DarkMel and concentrated my magic. Ever since Serge had interrupted DarkMel with her attack, I’d started setting up barriers and traps all over the area. I wouldn’t let either of them leave as they pleased.

“That’s wrong; I won’t run away. I won’t even move. The ones who will be running are all of you.” Right after DarkMel spoke, cracks started to run through the painted sky covering the Great Cathedral.

“You said that you were able to come down to this space, Protector... Do you know about the outside of the sanctuary?”

There was a long pause as Serge considered the question. “Nope.”

DarkMel snickered. “Thought not. After all, it’s something only a select few Apostles would know. Only Selector and Creator— Oh, sorry, he’s already dead. To fail in the very last moments... How pitiful. Well, just think of it as a parting gift from Creator.”

The fissures had already spread across the entire surface of the sky. One by one, pieces of the sky peeled off, revealing what was on the other side.

“What...is that?”

“A gigantic ship? No, a battleship?”

It looked like a huge, white fortress, something you probably wouldn’t see in modern Japan. It was so big, it was almost impossible to gauge its size from where we stood. We were actually standing on the deck of a truly massive battleship.

“Yes, it’s a battleship. More specifically, a flying battleship. You could also call it a flying ark of the gods. We are about to bust through the ceiling of hell to reach the Isle of Divine Judgment, where angels reside.”



Ark of the Gods, Deckspace:

The sanctuary was destroyed, connecting the space to the world beyond. Or more precisely, connecting us to the cavernous Evil Deity’s Heart. I expected a flood of noxious miasma to come rolling in, but for some reason, it felt like the entirety of the heart was filled with pure

air, which we were now exposed to. The air around us truly did become much nicer. I didn't know why, but it seemed I no longer needed to worry about the environment.

Still, that didn't take care of our biggest problem. Even now, we were on a flying white battleship. It was so large, it was like they had turned a high-rise sideways, but it still rose through the air. Raging winds rumbled through the gaps in the ship, and I was only barely able to stay standing on the deck. If I let my guard down for even a moment, I'd be blown off and away.

"Now then, what was the name of this ark again? Controller, did you manage to hear it from Creator before he died?" DarkMel seemingly spoke to the air.

"I believe its name should be the battleship *Elpis-Album*, my master," a voice suddenly boomed from the direction of the ship. It was Controller, Tristan.

"That's a little too long to say. Let's shorten it to just *Elpis*. Hee hee...you look happy, honey."

I took a moment to formulate my words. "I believe I have my own bone to pick with Tristan. I was going to give up since my friends would be fighting him, but I think I would like to bury him myself. So, is Tristan here on this ship?"

"Yes, he is. But as I said before, it's not time yet. The most peaceful way to resolve things right now is to have you leave by jumping off the deck, but...right, as your wife, I understand how you are. You'll never compromise."

"It's great that you understand. Saves me a lot of time!"

No matter how strong the wind was or how unstable my footing was, it'd be impossible to miss a target this big even with my eyes closed. Even more so because I was standing right on top of it like it was the ground—meaning, it was within reach of my scythe!

"I told you, I was most careful of your Boreas Death Scythe. After all, this thing can straight up ignore any barriers, the durability of its target, and even any affinities it would normally have. Heh heh, it's kind of a mild cheat, isn't it?"

I gasped in shock, so stunned that I couldn't form words. Meanwhile, Ange and Sera both responded with their own cries of "Huh?" and "What?!"

DarkMel had grabbed my hand as I'd tried to swing my scythe down. Even though she looked as young as Ruka, she easily stopped my swing. She was holding on to my arm like it was brittle glassware, but even then I couldn't budge my scythe.

I don't think I had ever bemoaned my lack of physical strength more than that day. But more than that, DarkMel had managed to get to me before Sera and Ange could even react. Both her strength and

speed were beyond normal limits. She was so fast, we couldn't follow her with our eyes, and she was able to stop an attack that had my full strength behind it without breaking a sweat. Worse, we hadn't even reached the area where we would fight.

So, this is a god's power. I love it!

"Ahh, don't make such a delighted face. I won't be able to stop myself from kissing you!"

"How dare—" both Sera and Ange shouted in unison.

"Hee hee...your jealousy is also sublime. But I'm in the middle of a conversation, you know. Please wait your turn."

The moment Sera and Ange tried to turn towards DarkMel, the raging winds blowing around and through the battleship intensified. They were too strong to be able to deal with using Fly or some other flight ability, and if it wasn't for DarkMel holding on to me, I'd have been blown away as well.

"This ship, the *Elpis*, uses an immense amount of magic as a power source in order to stir up wind and achieve flight. Since the wind is strong enough to make something this big fly, it can also do something like that."

DarkMel tugged on my arm so that I would bend down a little, allowing her to whisper in my ear. She explained the situation to me in the kind of tender tone one would use to talk to a beloved child. Still, it didn't change the fact that the wind was too strong.

"Wagh!"

"Krgghh!"

Unable to cling to the deck, both Serge, who was holding on to Elearis, and Sera were flung off. We would have been able to regroup if we could have escaped the effects of the wind, but as it was, it would be difficult for them to fight the winds and return.

Sera, gather everyone and retreat to a safe place!

::But—::

As long as I control myself, DarkMel won't fight! Now that the sanctuary's busted, it's more important that we find our friends and make sure they're safe! Hurry and go!

There was a pause.

::Got it. Make sure you come back alive, okay? If you don't, I'll cry!::

Sera opened her wings and flew off with the wind. Serge, on the other hand, used her Sky Walk-esque skill to get away.

"Hey Kelviiiiin! Sorry, but we'll take this opportunity to leave! Let's meet again if you survive!"

Her top priority was protecting Elearis. She must have decided that it would be better to take advantage of the confusion to escape rather than fight alongside us after seeing DarkMel's power.

“Whew, that was close,” said DarkMel. “Sera’s blood powers are scary. But with all this wind, her blood will never be able to touch the ark. After all, it wasn’t just her blood but Sera herself who succumbed to it. Protector’s decision was correct, since her Absolute Gospel wouldn’t activate near me. Now, all—”

Whoosh!

The sound of something sharp cutting through the wind swept past DarkMel’s neck.

“Whaaat?!”

“Aww wfwhaat’s weft idzz Ande (All that’s left is Ange)!”

Ange had used one of her daggers to swipe at DarkMel’s neck. But DarkMel blocked the attack by catching the knife with her teeth. It didn’t stop there, though; the blade that was being bitten down on creaked and groaned under the pressure, seeming like it would shatter at any moment.

“Ah...”

“Whew, as I thought, that’s not something I’d eat if I had a choice. This knife is something Creator made and one of Ange’s precious weapons, after all.”

I couldn’t perceive what had happened after DarkMel intercepted Ange’s knife. Best I could tell, there were exchanges between offense and defense happening at extreme speeds judging from the kunai and other hidden weapons flying everywhere. Either way, it ended with Ange losing consciousness. Then, DarkMel grabbed her from behind by the neck of her hood, stopping her from being thrown off by the wind.

“It was good that you used Uncontainable to let the wind pass through you, at least. I know you’ve never faced anyone faster than you, Ange, so it’s understandable that you’d be a little bewildered. Not only is your Assassin’s Strike useless if your target detects your attack, but the Uncontainable skill you rely on is also originally something I shared with you. I could just take it back, but...let’s not. You’ve been very useful to my dear husband since he was reincarnated, so I’ll gladly let you keep that.”

“You...”

“Now then, it looks like we’re finally alone, honey!”

“Unfortunately not, my master. I, Controller, am still here. Also, it’s already far past time to depart—” Controller cut in, but he was interrupted by DarkMel.

“I know. They were all just so belligerent that I had to play with them.” She puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. After putting Ange down, she turned to me with a face like a child about to beg for a head pat. Everything she did reminded me of Mel.

“Sorry, honey. I want to spend time with you as well, but if you

would just hold yourself back for a little longer, I can prepare a much more satisfying enemy. Could you just control yourself for now? Ha ha...”

DarkMel flung Ange off the deck. Since she was unconscious, Ange was instantly taken away by the raging winds around the ship. At the same time, DarkMel finally let go of me and my scythe.

“Ange!”

I flew forward with all my might, chasing after her. Making full use of both Fly and Sonic Acceleration, I managed to catch her. Unfortunately, thanks to that, it didn’t seem like I’d be able to catch up to DarkMel’s battleship.

“I will break through the ceiling of hell, return the third continent that should always have existed to the world, and manifest the Isle of Divine Judgment. Once I become the one true God, I will kill you as you’re on the brink of despair, honey.”



The Evil Deity’s Heart:

As the white ark rose up into the heavens, I began my retreat while carrying Ange and being buffeted by residual winds. I felt as if I were in the heart of a storm, and it was a Herculean task to try and make headway using Fly. Even though Ange was light and not much of an obstruction, she made flying a different beast entirely from when I was unencumbered.

“Bright Heal. Benediction Cure.” I started applying White Magic in an attempt to wake her up.

“Mm... Mnnn...” Luckily, the wounds DarkMel had inflicted seemed superficial, so Ange immediately responded to my treatments.

Whoosh!

I reflexively blocked the dagger that I expected to be coming for my neck. Apparently, her habits from her time as an assassin were deeply ingrained in her by now, so whenever she was forced unconscious, her body would immediately move to take the offender’s head. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like Ange would ever go back to how she was before. Of course, I wouldn’t like it if she did anyway, so that’s why I decided to accept how she was and take responsibility for it.

Still, her knife skills were as sharp as always. If I hadn’t known the knife would be coming for my neck beforehand, I’d have taken the hit despite my current level.

So, she lost against DarkMel even with this speed...

“Huh, Kelvin? Wasn’t I—”

“Sorry for waking you up while we’re stuck in all this wind. You were knocked unconscious after you attacked DarkMel. Do you

remember that?"

Ange thought back, trying to remember before replying, "Yeah. I thought the one thing I would never lose at is speed... Man, how lame can I get? Still, I'm glad you're okay, Kelvin."

"You really did save me, Ange. Thanks."

There was a good mood going between us as I stroked her head, but we were interrupted as some insensitive gusts of wind intensified greatly, threatening to splat us onto the ground.

Damn you, DarkMel.

"Aha ha...I'm fine, don't worry! In fact, I'm more energetic than ever! So let's change seats, Kelvin-kun!"

"Huh? Wooaghh?!"

As soon as she said that, Ange slipped out of my hands like a practiced escape artist, and before I knew it, I was the one being held. *Man, she's fast!*

"It'll be much more stable if I use Sky Walk, don't you think? There's no barrier now, so call a gathering through the Network. Oh, and will you cast Sonic Acceleration on me?"

Ange was raring to go, almost as if she were saying to me, "Leave everything to your big sis!"

Yeah...on paper, Ange's strength and speed stats are a cut above mine, so this is the most efficient method. Still, I need to complain about something.

"Could you stop it with the princess carry..."

"This is the most stable way to hold you. And no one's watching anyway. Now then, I'm gonna fly!"

"Ah, hey! Wait! I haven't put up the windbreak barri—"

She gave me absolutely no time to prepare myself, so that day, I was exposed to the world of those with an Agility of over 10,000.



Ange ran, jumped, and bounced. Each action dodged gusts of wind, bringing us to our destination by the shortest route possible. I'd already gotten over the embarrassment of being princess carried, so now I had the leeway to look out into the distance at the great cavern. Well, to be honest, if I didn't look off into the distance, I'd be pulled back to reality and then it would be a second coming of Colette. That was how fast we were going and how bad the weather was.

I guess I still have a ways to go—urghphh...

Still, I realized something new after gaining this sweeping view of the great cavern. This evil place that was once called the Evil Deity's Heart was in the midst of transforming into a glittering space filled with green. Thanks to all the violent winds, flowers were dancing through the air, forming a fantastic view. Here and there, I spotted

strengthened versions of the ferocious plants used by Dahak.

It can't be... I thought, so I sent off a telepathic message. As I suspected, Dahak had returned, having evolved into the Earth Dragon King and regrouped with Shutola's team to defeat Tristan. After that, he had started reforming the entirety of the Evil Deity's Heart. It wasn't just the vegetation; this forbidden land no longer had even a hint of its former self and now looked like a beautiful memorial park.

Naturally, the reason all the miasma had disappeared was also thanks to Dahak. Judging from how drastically the environment had been improved in such a short time, he must have gained a lot of power. As long as he was here, it didn't seem like we'd have to worry about destroying the ecosystem.

Exit the great cavern, then go northwest. Is it there? I asked.

Everyone else ended up gathering outside of the great cavern. Apparently, Shutola and Dahak's dragons-and-stuffed-toy team had already been high up in the air inside the cavern, but they'd decided to evacuate when the battleship appeared. They had found Sera, Rion, and the others who were evacuating the sanctuary at the same time and had left the great cavern with them.

Outside the cavern, the western team of Touya and co. was defeating the monsters crawling out of the ground. But when Nagua's group in the north turned the great cavern green, the Hero's work reached an end. Instead, whenever a monster tried to crawl out of the ground, they were immediately snapped up by one of Dahak's carnivorous plants. That was only a matter of course, but Touya remained wary just in case.

At least, until the battleship appeared.

After considering the positions of all the teams, it was decided that the gathering spot would be to the northwest outside of the great cavern. Ange was currently dashing there at full speed.

Ah, there they are. Just keep going and—wait, would you let me down first?

::Hmm, what to do? I don't mind just going in like this, you know?::

Ange was all grins, fully intent on mischief. Though she at least acted like she was thinking about it, I could see right through her.

After a pause, I decided to give up. *What do you want?*

::Lemme touch your neck as much as I want later::

That's hellla specific.

I agreed to Ange's request, and she released me from her hold. Now that we'd gotten this far, the fierce winds caused by the battleship were weak, so I could easily fly myself. More importantly, I didn't want to be seen like *that* by Touya and Nagua. Not ever!

Once we arrived at the meeting point, we found that everyone

was already there, and touched down to the sound of them welcoming us back.

“Sorry, Kel-nii!” Rion cried. “We were so worried because we couldn’t reach you through telepathy and we were going to go and save you, but we didn’t make it in time...”

“My apologies,” said Colette. “For some unknown reason, my techniques do not work in that place. By the time I noticed, the sanctuary had started to crumble...”

“I didn’t get to see mom...” Sylvia complained, depressed.

Meanwhile, Ema tried to drown me in excited questions. “What was that white thing, Kelvin-san?! No way... Was our mother on that?!”

I tried to process what they were all saying but quickly gave up. My ears were so busy, I was forced to ask them to come at me one at a time so that I could deal with them all in order. “Please, just speak one at a time.”

“It’s been a while, big bro. I told you already through telepathy, but I, Dahak, have become the Earth Dragon King!”

“You left out the ‘finally.’ You’re still last.”

“The hell you say, you shrimp?!”

“Aahh...don’t fight...”

It’s been a while since all three dragons were together. They haven’t changed even now that they’re kings, huh? A single glance was enough to make it clear that they were different, but their human forms were still the same—

“Well done, Kelvin-san. Are you hurt?”

Caught by surprise by her new face, it took a moment for me to respond. “Who the hell are you?”

“Huh? I-It’s Shutola. Did you forget me?”

No, no, anyone would be surprised, wouldn’t they? All this time, you looked like a young girl and spent your time chasing butterflies with Alex. Of course I’d be surprised with you suddenly returning to your original princess look! In fact, you should have told me through the Network beforehand if you were able to do that.

“Hm? Wait, does that mean you got your memories back?”

“I can tell you the full story later. For now, go see Efil-nee...I mean Efil-san.”

That reminded me of what had happened to Efil. “Yeah. I should.”

Shutola made way so that I could proceed to Efil, who was at the rear of the group. She was still lying on Clotho, with the slime in the form of a makeshift bed. Sera and Gerard were at her sides, watching her protectively. Though she was sleeping peacefully, the color of her face had yet to completely return to normal.

I took her hand in mine gently so as not to wake her up. “How is

she?"

"Thanks to the efforts of Colette and the pope, she's managed to get through the worst of it," Gerard explained.

"Still, it doesn't look like she'll be getting up soon, let alone resuming her work," Sera added. "She's on absolute bed rest!"

"I see..."

Though she was far from fine, I was grateful that Efil's life was no longer in danger. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like the other weight on my shoulder would be gone any time soon. I still had yet to hear a peep from Melfina, whom I'd Unsummoned and returned to my magic pool.



While we concerned ourselves with the ground, the white battleship rose higher and higher into the air. Even though it was getting quite far away by now, its majestic form was still clearly visible from where we were. When I looked back at it again, the absurdness of it stood out to me even more. It was way more advanced than any golem. I couldn't help but wonder, *Where the hell are they getting enough power to drum up this much wind? Is it powered by DarkMel herself?*

I pondered such things as I held Efil's hand. As I did so, fire bullets and light bullets screamed towards the battleship. Those bullets, which seemed like an attack, came in large numbers from everywhere, from all sides of the battleship. They were colorful spells of all types, and each one was extremely powerful.

"Where's that attack coming from? Whoever it is is clearly trying to bring down the battleship, aren't they?"

"Wouldn't it be the powerful demons who control the area around the Evil Deity's Heart? Anyone would notice a ship that white and obvious flying over them. If a strange and suspicious thing flies over a demon's territory, it's normal for them to try to shoot it down. Abyssland is smack-dab in the middle of an era of warring states, and now that my father's been revived, a lot of them are fairly irritated already."

"Should we take advantage of that and attack too, Kel-nii?"

I considered the suggestion for a moment. "No, let's not. We're too far away. Also, look."

I pointed towards the battleship, nodding for them to see for themselves. In response to the hordes of thousands of spells being launched at it, it didn't seem like the battleship was doing anything. Even so, as the spells neared it, they all lost momentum and eventually disappeared altogether before ever reaching the ship. No matter which direction the attacks came from or how much the

attackers tried to saturate the air with fire, nothing worked.

That was all because of the winds produced by the ship, the winds that had given Ange and me so much trouble. The vessel was still outputting those winds even now, and they acted as a sort of shield, shutting out all outside attacks. Even if we tried to launch magic from here, we most likely wouldn't be able to deal any damage.

There were also some monsters that took to the air in an attempt to attack the battleship directly. There was the giant centipede from before the great cavern had changed, for example. *Did it leave because it was trying to get away from Dahak's territory?* At any rate, it flew upwards in an attempt to assault the giant flying craft.

"Ahhh...it's a tragic sight when looking at it from far away."

"I didn't like it when we were fighting it, but it's just a big centipede in the end..."

The monster was beaten and sent flying by the violent winds before ending up a victim of the spells being fired from behind it. Its body was burned, cut apart, and frozen. Each part of it took a different type of damage, and it just *died*. By my estimation, it was around a lower Rank S in terms of strength, but it couldn't hold up against the sheer numbers. Also, it wasn't a very pretty sight.

"It looks like we won't be able to attack or even get close unless we do something about that wind, huh?" Ema noted.

"Mm, but that ship isn't doing anything even though it's being attacked," Sylvia replied.

"Maybe because it doesn't have any way to attack?"

Their observations were good, but I just didn't believe that Jildora would create an unarmed ship. The reason the battleship wasn't doing anything was that it didn't have to—their attackers weren't worth it. At least, that's what I thought. There was no need to counterattack or put up a barrier, since the wind it was creating to fly was enough to repel any assault. Since that was the case, there was no need to pay their attackers any mind. That was what DarkMel was thinking, by my estimation. The portion of her power that she had shown us indicated that she was that much of a threat. She was simply overwhelming.

Not to mention, she said that she'd break through hell's ceiling and manifest some sort of isle? She said it as I left, and with how desperate I was to save Ange and the sound of all the wind at the same time, I wasn't able to hear that well...but I'm sure DarkMel is moving to accomplish whatever she said her goal was. I should sort out what I know. Hell is another word for this place, Abyssland. So the ceiling would be...

After some time sorting through my thoughts, I needed to ask some questions. "Sera, I've heard that Abyssland has not only a weirdly colored sky but also an ocean of blood if you go all the way to the edges. But...we're underground, aren't we? Wouldn't there be a

ceiling if we fly up high enough?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. The color of the sky and the weather can change depending on who controls the area, but there's just one thing that never changes. Do you know what that is?"

"The height?"

"That's right! No matter where, there is always a wall blocking your way once you fly through the sky to a certain altitude. Even though it might look like the sky continues on, it's like you're being hemmed in by clear glass; the whole thing is one big wall. There was a demon who was good at flying and looked into it in the past, and that's what was written down in his book! By the way, the ocean of blood always leads back to the same spot if you go far enough, so there's no demon who ever crossed it. I've never even seen it."

Sera puffed out her chest with a proud noise. It was actually a mystery which great demon had written all of this down, but if it was true, was DarkMel trying to destroy that wall? The battleship was still ascending.

"Allow me to explain further."

A voice suddenly came from the sky. Everyone prepared for battle except for Clotho, who was tasked with caring for Efil. We all looked to where the voice was coming from with our weapons at the ready.

"Yahoo! It hasn't been all that long, but hi! Hey, come on, you too, Iris!"

"U-Uhhh...hi..."

The speakers were Serge Flore—the previous Hero—and Elearis. Serge was using Sky Walk to create footholds in the air and was standing above us, Elearis in her arms. More specifically, Serge had called out to us while floating in the air with a full-faced smile, as if we were close friends. Meanwhile, Elearis was in her arms, trying her best to imitate her friend but ultimately sounding very awkward. I had no idea what they were going for, but they were both waving at us energetically.

None of us said anything in return. We were confused, to say the least.

"Thought it wouldn't work... Aghh, that's embarrassing. A total waste of a first attempt..." muttered Elearis.

"That's not true! They're just surprised because we appeared so suddenly. I'm sure of it!" Serge replied.

No, no, come on, guys. That's way too casual for such a reappearance. And aren't you coming back way too fast?

"U-Um... Ah, it's Hu-chan! Heyoo!"

"See, look! Rion's nice; she replied!"

"Urggh...her kindness hurts..."

Uh...hmmm? Isn't Elearis acting kinda...strange? Her face is ultra red

and she's covering it with both her hands...

Before I could say anything, the ancient Heroes, Sylvia, and Ema all jumped forward.

"Well now, if it isn't Serge! I knew you wouldn't be able to forget me! I see I have a relative here, but you take priority!"

"Heh. I knew you'd come, my lady. But I suppose I must admit that it was unexpected for you to hurry here so fast. Who could have thought you would come to me before your body matured!"

"Truly wonderful."

"Ah, uh...ummm...yeah... There's something I want to tell you, Serge—"

"Mom?! You're my mom, right?! Sylvia, that's mom!" Ema exclaimed.

"Mnn...mom..." murmured Sylvia.

"Guh— Wait!" Elearis cried.

Overwhelmed, Serge fled with Elearis still in her arms. What followed was an all-out game of tag that would only end when one side ran out of stamina.



Though a mood-breaking game of tag between Heroes had started, DarkMel's battleship remained indifferent as it continued to rise into the air. At this point, there weren't even any monsters flying up to try and attack it. *Makes sense; a lot of them were shot down by friendly fire, after all.* But the biggest reason of all was that the battleship had risen higher than the monsters' maximum altitude. It seemed the demons had finally realized that nothing they could do would be effective, so at some point they had stopped their bombardment of it completely. Now, the battleship was left to freely rise as it pleased.

"Breaking the ceiling of hell... What would that even do?"

"Allow me to handle this explanation. Since we have ceased to be deities, we're no longer bound by the restrictions of artificial bodies, so I believe I will be able to answer most of your questions."

As those words reached my ears, I could have sworn I'd had heard that line before somehow. When I turned around, I found Elearis in the arms of Sylvia and Ema.

The sight gave me pause, but I quickly gathered my wits to ask, "What's going on here?"

"Serge left me here, apparently to lighten her load as much as possible... Oughh, so tight..."

"Mm, we're holding on to mom so she doesn't disappear again."

"Oowahh...mom...mooom!"

Though Elearis seemed to feel rather cramped within the hold of her two daughters, she was dealing with it like a champ and stroking

their heads as she did so. *So she really was Sister Ellen, the nun who raised them as her daughters? Actually, I know too little about the previous Goddess of Reincarnation. It would be nice if I knew exactly which one she was.*

“Ahhh...well, first, I’d appreciate it if you explained your relationship to Sylvia and Ema, as well as whether you’re Iris or Elearis. Everything’s changed so much, I’m a little confused.”

“Fair enough. If it’s something I can an—oof... If it’s something I can answer, I’ll tell you any—oof!”

“Sylvia, Ema, would you please loosen your grips on your mother for a little while?”

“Huh? Is this too tight for you, mom? But you were fine with this before!”

“Mom?! Are you sick with something?! Is it incurable?! Is it because you’re weakened, like you’ve lost all your stats?!”

The conversation had completely stagnated, so I applied Silent Whisper to the two girls. *Your mom is gonna tell me a lot now, so please behave. Also, she had her power sucked out like Melfina, so please be careful of how much strength you’re putting into your arms. Your mom’s pretty close to actually taking damage.*

“Thank you. That was close. I almost died...”

“It wouldn’t be funny if a precious source of info to me died like that. So?”

“Right. Let’s start with my relationship to Sylvia and Ema. I am Sister Ellen, the one who founded the orphanage and raised them as their mother. Of course, that was all done when I was fully into the role of Iris.”



“Well, I already figured that. But what’s with all this Iris-Elearis stuff?”

“Yes, well...where should I start? This body was made to be an imitation of Iris, but the soul inside it is that of Elearis reincarnated. That’s why the body is Iris, but my mind is that of Elearis. Please think of it that way.”

I kind of get it, and I kind of don't. So, that means that Elearis really was reincarnated, but DarkMel messed with the reincarnation to weird out her memories and make her think she was Iris? That would mean DarkMel can use the Reincarnate technique. That's going to be trouble.

“I started my activities as an Apostle a long while ago. On the surface, I pretended that my goal was to revive Elearis as her Arbitrator. But it was actually all a ploy to make the dark Melfina, DarkMel, the deity of this world. That said, I didn’t spend the entire time as Iris the Arbitrator. Outside of anything to do with gods, Iris was a very kind saint, after all. Since I was acting as her, I think at some point I started to just ask myself, ‘What would she do?’ In those rare times when I was free, with nothing I needed to do in my capacity as an Apostle...”

“Mm...”

“Mom?”

Oh? As expected, magic doesn't work too well on Sylvia. Silent Whisper had already worn off on her. As soon as that registered with me, Elearis started stroking their heads again.

“So that’s why you founded the orphanage as Sister Ellen?”

“I can only say it’s most likely the case. At the very least, though, both Iris and I could not bear to ignore those children. I don’t know which side of me wanted to raise them with warmth and love as my own, but I did. These children truly grew good and honest...much too good for the likes of me. I must be thankful to DarkMel for my being able to meet the children of the orphanage, if nothing else.”

“I became a general.”

“And I was her aide.”

“Y-Yeah...”

I had a feeling that the nature of Sylvia and Ema’s excitement about bragging like they did was different than usual. *Is it just me or has their mental age regressed ever since they reunited with Elearis? It's like they're spoiled children.*

“Why did you disappear, leaving only a letter? We were really worried about you, mom.”

“I quit my job as a general to look for you all over. I even made my friends sad...”

“Uh, well...you could say that I started to awaken to Iris the

Apostle, and I didn't even have the time to say goodbye. I-I'm sorry! I'm not good with words!"

So the result was a single letter. I'm sure Elearis did that to make sure they wouldn't look for her, but those who read it would definitely take it as a sign to go looking. Apparently, this former deity was really bad at explanations, and that went for the one she had offered just now as well. There was no way someone like Sylvia or Ema, who didn't know much about Apostles, would be able to understand that excuse in the first place.

"So basically, your mom was being controlled by the big bad goddess on that boat. And the reason she's here is also because she was being controlled, that's all!"

"Wh-Whaaat? You can't just sum it up like that..."

"What the heck? That's so sad!"

"Mm...it's on the top of the list now. Let's bring that boat down."

There was an awkward lull in the conversation. I figured that a loose summing-up like that would be more than enough for Sylvia and Ema for the moment. What they wanted most was a clear, easy-to-understand cause to act on, even if it was rough and ready.

"Okay, for now I've at least understood that you're Elearis. Aghh...that's so confusing; can I just call you Ellen?"

"Uh...sure, I don't mind. That was what I went by when I was living with these children, after all."

"All right then, Ellen, moving on to my next question—"

BWOOM!

I was interrupted by a loud booming noise suddenly coming from above us. More specifically, far above, from DarkMel's battleship.

"Looks like the ship's reached the ceiling," Ellen remarked.

"Going back to my first question: Abyssland is underground, isn't it? Wouldn't it be dangerous if the ceiling were to be destroyed?"

"No, there won't be any direct damage dealt to the demons' world. Originally, Abyssland was just one of this world's continents. In the age of myths when the gods were warring, this place was where the Evil Deities were sealed away along with all those who sided with them. Destroying the ceiling would, in other words, be destroying the seal. DarkMel intends to rejoin this continent with the rest of the world."



Back when this world was newly born, there were a total of three continents: the Eastern and Western Continents that are known even today and a large third one that would form a triangle with the other two. This huge third land mass could be thought of as the Northern Continent.

However, there are no records of such a continent in modern times and no signs of it ever being discovered. It didn't even exist in stories, although there were many in the past who had sailed the world's oceans in hopes of making new discoveries. Still, this was only natural. Even if those explorers had happened upon the area where the Northern Continent used to be, they would be unable to perceive it thanks to a massive barrier erected by ancient gods, and space would be distorted around them, so they would simply pass through.

The gods' barrier was big enough to encompass the entire continent. This included, of course, everything from a large amount of the sky to the bottom of the ocean. The barrier was able to completely hide the continent's existence from everything not already on it, and that was why it had disappeared from history.

It was not possible to pass through the barrier from the inside either. The waters of the ocean ringing the isolated Northern Continent had changed from transparent blue to an opaque red and from a normal watery consistency to one very similar to blood. The ocean of "blood" was very difficult to swim in and was also tumultuous all year round. This special weather in which the storms never stopped prevented any would-be seafarers. Even if someone were to forcefully swim out, they would simply be sent right back in a mirror of what would happen if you were to approach the barrier from the outside.

The last measure was the sky above, which looked entirely normal. Depending on where you were on the continent, both the weather and the color of the sky would be different. If that was all you looked at, it might seem possible to break out if you had flight abilities. But, as one might expect, the barrier had no blind spots. The barrier itself was so big that it stretched above the altitude most could fly to, so even just confirming there was a wall there required a ridiculously high operational ceiling. In order to break this barrier that had been set up by the divine, one would need powers equal to or above a god's.

With all this in the way, it proved impossible to overcome the barrier and reach the outside world. So the denizens of the isolated Northern Continent came to believe they were underground, eventually calling the continent Abyssland. However, the gods left a single method connecting this place to the larger world. That method manifested itself in a couple of places in the world: the Fiery Mouth of Purgatory in Faanis on the Western Continent, which paired with the Boundless Poison gate located on the eastern tip of the Northern Continent, and the Waterfall of Heaven and Hell located in Toraj on the Eastern Continent that paired with the Shadow Gaol located on the western tip of the Northern Continent. Once a Demon Lord was

born in Abyssland, ancient Heroes would travel through these paths left behind, overcoming trials of Dragon Kings to do so.

So why was the Northern Continent sealed like this, one may ask? The answer to that lies all the way back in ancient times, in the age of the gods. Back during the origins of the world, the land was being fought over by two forces: gods and fallen Evil Deities. It is said that many of the world's denizens took part in the final battle. This final fight, which lasted a long time, eventually ended in the gods' victory. However, though the gods had defeated the Evil Deities, the other side was too powerful for the gods to completely extinguish them.

The suggestion the gods eventually adopted was to use a great ritual to seal them away. The Northern Continent would be entirely covered in a barrier because the Evil Deities would be trapped at its center. The first barrier was very strong and limited in scope, and was what is now known as the Evil Deity's Heart. Then, the second defensive layer was the large barrier that encompassed the entire Northern Continent. Rather than sealing in the Evil Deities, the second barrier existed to be a jail for those who followed them.

Many races took part in the war between the gods. Some were humanoid, others beastly, and there were even insects in the mix—and the ones who threw their lot in with the Evil Deities were forced to live inside this jail of a barrier. The gods lumped all those on the Northern Continent together and designated them “demons,” forcefully treating them as the same species regardless of their forms. These beings became the ancestors of modern demons.

Among these species were those who were unfortunately already living on the Northern Continent, like vampires. Though these species were able to retain their individual identities as species, they were still trapped in this prison just like the demons. There were also those who grew into their own unique species through Evolution, but almost all of them became Demon Lords.

There was a reason it was so easy for demons to become Demon Lords. This enclosed environment of the Northern Continent was made for it to be easy for evil intent to grow and prosper. The landscapes changed drastically depending on who controlled the area, and land served as an easy spark for conflict between demons, which only spawned long chains of successive grudges. The gods had purposefully shaped the Northern Continent to be this way in an effort to lessen the number of candidates with the aptitude to become a Demon Lord, since one of them would randomly be picked to bear the Black Grimoire. That was basically how they thought, so most of history's Demon Lords had been demons.

If a Demon Lord were to be born from a Black Grimoire, then Deramis's Oracle would summon a Hero in response. Once the Hero

defeated the Demon Lord, negative emotions would stop flowing to the Evil Deity, preventing its revival. That was the system the gods had created. The Demon Lord being the only casualty would mean that collateral was being kept to a minimum, which was the best way to keep peace in the world. Then again, if looked at from a different perspective, it could also be taken as using the demons who had betrayed the gods to take the side of the Evil Deities as fuel.

I guess that's the best way to summarize Elearis's explanation.

"DarkMel has a reason to dislike this world's system. Enough of a reason to know that by destroying the barrier around Abyssland herself, she'll be breaking this law of the world and creating a new one in the process."

I had to mull that over for a moment. "Is that really possible? You said it during your explanation, but the barrier made by the gods would need equal or greater power to break, wouldn't it? DarkMel sounded like she had yet to fully awaken to that much power."

"That would be true for the power to reincarnate souls, but other than that, DarkMel already has just as much power as any god. Normally, she wouldn't be able to bring this kind of power into the mortal world. But she reincarnated my divine soul as Iris the Arbitrator and used what used to be my body to create an artificial one for Mel. In doing so, she turned the impossible possible."

KABOOOOOOM!

An even louder racket than before took control of the air around us. When I looked up to check, I saw that the white battleship had forcefully rammed into the ceiling in an attempt to break it. The wind around the ship seemed even fiercer than usual. *Is that DarkMel's doing?*

"With her power, it's probably only a matter of time before the barrier is destroyed. Using that much abnormal power would normally cause a god to make a move, but...has Melfina responded to you yet, Kelvin?"

"No, not yet..."

Elearis closed her eyes, seeming like she had already expected the answer I would give her as she shook her head. "The leader of this world is the God of Reincarnation. And the current Goddess is Melfina, who has yet to be completely absorbed. But she's currently near death. The only reason she's alive right now is because of you, Kelvin, and your decision to return her to your pool. Actually, DarkMel may have predicted that you'd do that once she was in danger. It's easy to return from an artificial body to your real one. But since she was struck through by a Holy Lance, her soul was pinned to the body it was in. Even though she survived by being returned to your pool, in order to return to her original body, you'll need to

summon her once more. With her Holy Lance stolen and her power as a god reduced, Melfina will be weakened in all stats and other respects, and if you summon her in that state...I'll be honest, I have no idea what will happen to her. I would recommend against rashly summoning Melfina."

I couldn't find the words to respond to that.

KRAKOOOOOOOM!

While watching the ship repeatedly slam into the ceiling, I thought of Mel. That day, the third continent was returned to the world, and many bore witness to a large white ship.



Five days had passed since the battleship had broken the barrier around Abyssland. These past few days had passed by in a blur of activity, and this went for everyone in the country—no, for both continents.

The gods' barrier had been destroyed, and Abyssland had suddenly reappeared in its entirety. To most of the world, who didn't know what had happened, it was like a new continent had suddenly been discovered. That alone was enough to shake the world, but it was paired with a sighting of an absolutely enormous flying white battleship. Even though it spent most of its time flying above the clouds, it was impossible for the craft to avoid being seen. Furthermore, a drastic change occurred within the Western Continent due to a sudden event. The largest country on the continent, the Rizean Empire, had its capital fall in a single night.

"Ever since Abyssland—I mean, the Northern Continent—showed itself, the world has gone through a great upheaval. Starting with Gustav and the subordinate forces of his Grelbarekan Empire keeping the various areas of the Northern Continent stable and at peace, the four great countries of the Eastern Continent have stepped up to control their own territories. On the other hand, the Western Continent only fell further into strife because of what happened to their largest power, the Rizean Empire. The embers of conflict reached neutral and allied countries alike, so the situation is becoming more like the great wars that enveloped the Eastern Continent in the past. It would be best for us, the four great powers, to intervene, but thanks to the angels coming out of that ark, we don't have the leeway to reach out to other continents..."

"I would love to say, 'Allow us, Grelbareka, to lend a hand,' but we're in a similar situation here. Given how we look...no matter how much information on demons we circulate, it isn't getting through to the people."

With five days past, we had returned to the Eastern Continent to

plan a countermove. I was in Trycen's castle today, in the central quarter, the very same vital facility that Sera had assaulted on her own before. We were using the crystal placed here to communicate and share up-to-date information between countries. Apparently, this was the same kind of crystal Tsubaki-sama and the Beast King had used back when I was being promoted. Right now, I was on a call that included adult Shutola and my father-in-law.

"I suppose there's no other choice but to take our time with that. Changing people's minds requires patience. Okay, then, call if anything else comes up."

"Indeed. Make sure not to push yourself too hard, Princess of Trycen."

"Thank you for your concern."

"You shouldn't push yourself either, father-in-law. If you came down with something, your subordinate Victor would die."

"Oh, shut up, fool! You didn't have to tell me that. I would never do anything to make Sera and Bell sad! More importantly, when will you be coming again? Actually, I'd be fine if Sera came without you."

"It's only been a week... Huh? The crystal's running out of magic? Sorry, father-in-law, looks like I have to go. Be well!"

"Damn you, you fool of a son! We aren't finished ye—"

The connection between Trycen and Grelbarelka's Demon Lord Castle broke. Unfortunately, the crystal had run out of magic, cutting my conversation with my father-in-law short. *My word, what great timing. How mysterious...*

"Don't be so mean, Kelvin-san; I feel sorry for him." Shutola looked very amused as she warned me. The look on her face made it hard for me to object.

"I'm the one who won't last if I don't at least keep this much distance from that demon. He tries to get us to go back every chance he gets, after all. Also, you're one to talk, Shutola. I got so used to you calling me 'dearest brother' that the way you refer to me like a stranger just feels weird."

"Uh...sorry, but calling you that in this form is really embarrassing."

In regard to Shutola's memories, she really had regained them all. Apparently, she'd been getting her memories back little by little and had finally gotten them all back the other day upon meeting Tristan in the Evil Deity's Heart. However, possibly due to her Unique Skill, Perfect Memory, a harmful irregularity had occurred.

"Yep, I can easily say it like this, dearest brother!"

"Uhhh...yeah. I know I said what I said, but now I'm not sure how to interact with you..."

Shutola had regained her memories and was now back to her

perfectly brilliant self. More accurately, she'd mellowed out a little, but either way, her memories were back. Still, that didn't erase all the time she'd spent with us as her younger self.

Shutola's Perfect Memory made it so that the version of her who spent time in our mansion and went on journeys with us still remained. It seemed that, at least for the moment, her form dictated which personality was dominant, but her adult and child selves were mixing together. The two personalities also shared memories, and both were equally Shutola. There were times when the adult version would call me "dearest brother," and whenever that happened, she would immediately correct herself with a face as red as a strawberry.

In the end, I decided not to think about it too deeply and settled things within my mind with the thought, *Oh well, she's cute, so it's fine, right?* At the very least, Gerard had already accepted adult Shutola as his granddaughter, and both Rion and Ruka interacted with her normally. She wouldn't change any more either, since she'd evolved into a Sage. *Yeah, there's only about a ten-year difference between her child and adult forms. They're pretty much the same.*

"Did you come to some slapdash conclusion, dearest brother? It looks like you've decided to just let it go and stop thinking about things."

"I didn't stop thinking, and I haven't let anything go. What're you saying, Shutola? Hah hah hah..." On the other hand, there were also times when the young Shutola would become incredibly sharp.

"Yo, we're comin' in! Uh, why're you a kid again, Shutola?"

"Ah, esteemed brother!"

Whoops, there's Trycen's prince. They say that clothes make the man, and they were right. Even that fighting idiot Azgrad was looking somewhat dignified. *I'm pretty sure it's all thanks to his clothes, though.*

"Because I *feel* like it! It doesn't change how fast I work, so it's fine, right?"

"Even if you don't see a problem, you'll slow everyone around you down. Especially Dan, he'll do that thing where he massages his eyes. And the girls will start going crazy too."

"Doesn't that also apply to the adult Shutola? She was pretty distracting to the soldiers, wasn't she? Though she did raise their morale crazy high."

It took a moment for Azgrad to respond. "That's just a sad fact of man's nature."

We then launched into an impromptu little sister story swap. The day that Azgrad joins my comrade Kilto in Gaun and me in the little sister alliance may come soon.

"Stop with this fruitless, stupid conversation, my dearest and esteemed brothers! Also, have our scouts returned, esteemed brother?"

“Yeah, looks like the outside’s the same as always.”

According to the scouts that Azgrad had deployed, angel-like monsters were appearing all over the country. To be clear, they were not angels; they were monsters that mimicked angels. Ever since that day, the white battleship that DarkMel was in would appear in the airspace of countries all over the world, and whenever it did, it would scatter those monsters.

As long as you didn’t get close to them, they were harmless. If you left them alone, they would just stand there, motionless, like statues. However, once you got within a certain distance, they would start to go on a rampage, as if their earlier stillness had all been a ruse. How strong they were varied from specimen to specimen, but even the weakest was on the lower end of Rank S. Leaving aside the ones that were dropped into unpopulated places like some remote mountain, it would be a bad day when one was finally dropped in the middle of a village. They were too strong for standard soldiers to deal with, so the people with the power to handle them, like my party, Sylvia, and Prettiana, had scattered wide and were spending every day dealing with them.

“Hmm...am I right? Are there more angel monsters being dropped onto the Northern and Eastern Continents? According to Ren-chan and Ran-chan from Faanis, there aren’t that many on the Western Continent...”

There was a moment of silence before Azgrad piped up, “Hey, Kelvin, how about returning to Parth once? Nothing’ll come of you worrying, and Shutola’s also working herself to the bone every day. Both of you should go home to Parth and take a rest. It’ll be quick if you use the teleportation gate, right?”

“W-Wait a second, esteemed brother...”

“Are you sure? There are still pseudoangels left, right?”

“You and Dahak have gotten rid of a lot of them since you two were dispatched to Trycen. Dan and I can take care of the rest for a while.” Azgrad paused for a moment. “You know, I know you’re trying to act like everything’s normal, but I know something’s up with you. Trycen hasn’t fallen so far as to work someone to death, so get going!”

With that, Shutola and I were pretty much forced back to our mansion in Parth.



Kelvin’s estate, in front of the underground teleportation gate:

We used Trycen’s teleportation gate to return to Parth. We left Dahak behind to make sure they had the minimum needed power in place, so it was just Shutola and me. After all, Dahak was also helping to restore Trycen’s greenery. He’d gotten farmland as a reward from

Shutola and was steadily expanding his territory (or farm?) as the Earth Dragon King off in some place I didn't know. Since there was money involved, he'd apparently left everything to Shutola, and it seemed everything was going well on that front. With those two involved, Trycen's food supply and environmental problems would probably all be solved soon. Just the thought was scary.

"Welcome home, Master."

"Master, welcome hooooome! You too, Shutola-chaaan!"

"We're home!"

Once we passed through our personal teleportation gate, located under our mansion, we found Ellie and Ruka waiting to greet us. Ruka and Shutola immediately started to play with each other.

"Yeah, we're home. How is everything?"

"There haven't been any problems. The head maid is also getting better by the day. However, she tries to work the moment I take my eyes off her, so stopping her has been the hardest part of my job."

"That Efil... I told her to rest well..."

"That's just how she is. This isn't something I should be saying as someone who works under her, but...from my perspective as a single mother...well, she's like a child who's squirming in bed because she wants to go play even though she has a cold."

"So work equals playing to her..."

"I'd love it if you'd say something to her. Your word is what works best on the head maid."

"Sure, sure, I get it. Sorry for troubling you."

At the moment, Efil, the head maid of this place, was in convalescence. Also, since Shutola had gone off to Trycen, her guards, Rosalia and Huba, were absent. So the mansion's staff was inevitably shorthanded, although we had only come back to Parth once, since we'd been darting all over the Eastern Continent, leaving Ellie and the others with a large weight on their shoulders. But everything was fine now. Since Shutola had returned, her guards had done the same.

"Hm? You girls..."

"I, Rosalia, have returned, vice head maid Ellie!"

"Huba Rockway! I have returned!"

I had brought the dragon-type perfect maid and the miniskirt maid back from Trycen as reinforcements. That should fill the hole left by Efil somewhat. A feast for the eyes also leads to peace in one's heart.

"I'm leaving the two of them to you."

"Understood."

Now then, this is the first vacation I've had in a while. What should I do with it? Maybe I could look over my equipment since I haven't done that in a while—

“Dearest brother.”

“Hm?” Shutola tugged on my clothing. *Is she done playing with Ruka?*

“Jeez...don’t put up a front in your own house. Hurry and go see big sis Efil! Go on, get out of here!”

“Yooooou’reee wrooooonggg!”

Shutola pushed me along all the way to Efil’s room. Midway, she was joined by Ruka, who thought it was funny.



Efil’s room:

When I knocked on the door, I received a short “Who is it?” Once I responded from the outside, I heard a flustered pattering from inside. *Efil always keeps things neat and tidy. Why is she so panicked in there?*

“Yo! It’s been a while, Efil.”

“Master! If you were coming back, you should have told me through the Network. Um...I haven’t been able to clean much these past few days so it may be a little dusty...but only a little; it shouldn’t affect your health! Ahh, but my pride as a maid!”

Even though all I’d done was greet her, Efil was extremely flustered, all from the comfort of her bed. *Yeah, she’s doing much better than before.*

When I sat down beside her bed, she sat up.

“Hey now, is it all right for you to do that? You’re not pushing yourself, are you?”

“I can do this much, at least. Honestly, I’d like to clean my own room by myself, if nothing else.”

“And I’m telling you, that’s pushing yourself. I’m ordering you not to work until further notice.”

“Th-That’s not fair, Master...”

After that, I told her about what had happened over the last few days. I told her everything, from the state of the world, to the whereabouts of the ark to the appearance of the pseudoangels and the diary that Riold left behind—almost as if I were trying to get a load off my chest.

“Right now, no country is fully in control. We’re working with other adventurers to go out and take care of things, but the plan is to come up with a better solution soon. Shutola, father-in-law, Tsubaki-sama, and the others are all cooperating for that purpose. What most surprised me is Serge, though! She went and asked me how to get stronger. Up until now, she’s been relying on her incredible stats and skills, but now she says she wants to polish herself. Even though she’s basically unbeatable one-on-one already, she’s still trying to get stronger! That made me so happy! So when I suggested a sparring

match, I lost just like that. It didn't really stand out with Touya, but damn, Absolute Gospel is a menace."

"Hee hee, that's so like you, Master."

"Is it? Well, it's not like I can just take that lying down. I mean, if I can't at least take down Serge, there's no way I'll be able to win against DarkMel. You know, she apparently has a Unique Skill that lets her form a party all by herself. For now, my goal is to make her use it. Well, anyway, strengthening ourselves is the top priority. I'll need to upgrade our equipment if I can too, and I'm worried about the Western Continent. Azgrad told me to rest, but there's no time—"

"Master." Suddenly, the tone of Efil's voice changed. She still sounded as delicate and cute as usual but warmer somehow. "Isn't there something else you'd rather say? Something you want to let out? When I, as your personal maid, and even more so as a woman, see you forcing yourself to keep something in, it makes me so sad. Please, why not try expressing those feelings to me?"

Efil looked straight at me with her emerald eyes blurred with tears. I could feel the edges of my eyes becoming just a little bit hot.

I took a deep breath before saying, "Could I...borrow your chest for a little bit?"

"Go ahead."

I buried my face in her chest slowly, but with a motion like I was jumping into it. She wrapped a single arm around me in a hug, with her other arm stroking my head.

I did have something I wanted to say. But all my feelings were jumbled up, and I had no idea where to start. All I could do was go around hunting, killing, crushing, and tearing apart the monsters that were threatening the world—but now it seemed it was time to pay the piper. Everything that I'd been holding back by keeping myself busy came rushing in.

"It's been five days since then... Mel...she's been so quiet; she won't respond to me at all... In fact, her stats have been getting even more strange lately! When we first came back after DarkMel absorbed her power, her stats were still normal. But now the words and numbers all look bugged, and there's a bunch of nonsense written everywhere. I went through all of my connections to find a way to save her, but I haven't found anything. Where did I go wrong, Efil? It's like I...killed Mel...myself..."



“No, you didn’t go wrong anywhere, Master. Melfina is still alive. What you need is to rest. I will be with you always, so just take it easy for now. Let it all out, don’t worry about how you look, and just cry. It doesn’t matter what you show people; no one will laugh at you, Master. The only one here is me, and I love you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Y-Yeah...you’re right... You’re...right...”

I cried more that day than any other day I had experienced since reincarnating into this world.

Interim: Memories of the Past

???:

Just how much did I let Efil spoil me yesterday? I had let out everything that I'd been keeping in, cried without caring how I looked, and fallen asleep at some point. *Ooohh, I fell asleep.* At any rate, I had used up all my energy and ended up sleeping like a log for a few days.

"That's what happened...right?"

I should have fallen asleep on Efil's bed with her by my side, but when I woke up, the first thing I saw was a beautiful garden. It almost looked like the estate's garden Dahak had been maintaining, and the fountain I was seeing was just like the one Clotho liked.

But this statue looks like something a certain Oracle would summon...and then there are lions and angels... It's almost like it's trying to assert that this isn't our estate.

"This scenery...it's like someone took random things from my memories and mixed it around. Is this a dream?"

"Just what I'd expect from you, honey. You pick things up mysteriously fast."

Hearing her voice surprised me, so it took a moment before I could respond. "So, would your appearance here be some sort of wish fulfillment of mine?"

"Who knows? Personally, I would love it if that were true."

Apparently, I'm even more of a sissy than I thought I was. I'm still full of lingering regrets and feelings even after spilling it all out to Efil. What a useless man I am.

Who could blame me for thinking that way? I was seeing Melfina in my dreams. *She's got the same smile as the night she wore that dress, before she disappeared. Actually, this is the same as when she wore that dress and got hungry and sneaked into the kitchen. The air about her that's so close and familiar even though she's a goddess is exactly the same! Come on, don't come for me in my dreams too. I'm gonna cry again!*

"Um, it seems like you've misunderstood something. I'm not a dream or illusion or projected image, okay? I'm the real, true, one and only Melfina."

It took me even more time to recover from that one. "What?"

"I said, I'm your Mel!"

Mel (temp) struck a pose that looked like it should have come

with a cutesy sound effect. For a moment, I considered it might be some sort of attack from DarkMel, but she didn't seem like the type to do something this thoughtless. In fact, everything I felt told me that this was the real Mel.

"Are you really...Mel?"

"You're even more doubtful than usual today. But there wasn't anything you could do about our parting that way. I was very moved by how you worried about me—"

I'm sure she won't mind if I cut her off. I leaped at her, giving her the strongest hug that I could. She felt soft through her dress, and the faint smell of her hair tickled my nose. I loved it.

"Hwafghh!"

Next, I put my palms on her cheeks to check their softness. Everything was just as I remembered.

"Mel... You're really...Mel!"

"Yes, I already told you—"

Once again I interrupted her, this time with a kiss. She seemed surprised by the sudden contact, but once she had caught up with what was happening, she wrapped an arm around my back. We spent quite a while with our lips intertwined, but I was still far from satisfied. My feelings were bubbling over endlessly with desire.

"You really are so true to your desires. Not even I could stop rumors about you being a womanizer at this rate."

"Whoever says that, let them. I just care about what's happening right now."

Honestly, I didn't care what was written on my entry in the Adventurer Directory. I was able to touch Mel again. That alone was enough for me.

"I will say, I wanted to make contact with you much earlier, okay? But, um...as you know, I'm in a very dangerous state. It's true you're seeing the real me right now, but it's also true that the other me has pretty much taken all my power. It's likely I'll only be able to communicate with you like this through your dreams."

"Even if that's true, why didn't you reply all this time? Do you know how worried I was these last five days?"

"Your emotions... It was like you were at your wit's end, honey. So much so that even your dreams were heavily resistant to interference. I simply wasn't able to get in. Today was the first day you were finally able to sleep stress-free!"

It took me a moment to process that. *What? My mental state was the cause? I know I was straining myself to act stoic... That was actually a bad thing?*

"Make sure you thank Efil once you wake up!"

"Y-Yeah... Wait...you know what's happening outside?"

“No, I’m basically permanently asleep in this state. I’m gleaning information through you instead of knowing it myself. But, um...I’m making sure to be discreet, so don’t worry! Still, I don’t know if you should be doing that with someone who’s sick...but...”

I had no words. She was definitely going through *all* my memories.

“A-Anyway...I’m glad we could talk, even if it’s only in a dream. For now... Oh right, you already know what’s going on. As you can see, DarkMel has the advantage. We need to heal you somehow—nmghu...?”

Melfina suddenly put a finger to my lips to stop me. *What? Is this revenge for earlier?*

“Before that, I have something I want to tell you, honey.”

“What’s that?”

“First, about my current condition. I’m able to talk to you like this through dreams, but it isn’t something I can do anytime. It’s only when DarkMel’s influence is weak. In other words, I can only talk to you when DarkMel is asleep.”

I had to ponder that a little. “She’s a goddess, isn’t she? After a fashion, at least. Does she even need sleep?”

“Of course she does; sleep is essential! In the first place, if gods didn’t need rest then I wouldn’t have taken this paid vacation!”

That’s true. Right, I remember; Mel’s excuse for coming with me was that she was taking a paid vacation. So, basically, DarkMel is sleeping right now? She’s a child, at least in appearance, so I guess she might need a proper amount of sleep.

“Let’s get back on track. There’s something I figured out about her.” Mel cleared her throat before continuing, “It happened when she absorbed my power. In exchange for losing essentially all my abilities, I gained her memories. No, well, I guess they were *my* memories...the ones I forgot. They all came flooding back to me when I was struck by my holy lance. Everything, including the life before your previous life, and who I was before I became a goddess.”

I could only say one word to that: “What?”

The life before my previous life? So...me before my life in Japan? And what does Mel mean by memories from before she became a goddess? What does that have to do with anything?

The conversation paused as I struggled to think it through.

No, wait, I...think I can already guess. Once in a while, I used to catch little bits and pieces of things in my dreams. A girl’s pained screams, spreading crimson flames, the horrible sight of bodies, rubble... It’s faint, but I remember seeing those over and over again. The man in my dreams was already gone, and there was a girl holding him in her arms as she cursed god repeatedly, determined. That... Those two were...

“It seems like you’ve also understood something, honey.”

I collected myself. “Dreams sure are convenient. You’re even more sensitive to what I’m thinking than usual. So, it really is...”

“Yes. That scene you’ve seen so many times in your dreams—that was me before I became a goddess and you before you were reincarnated in Japan.”



How many hundreds...thousands of years ago was it? Long before the warring era of the Eastern Continent as well as Demon Lord Gustav’s rise to power. The beginning of this story starts with a single angel breaking free of her homeland.

If Abyssland, home of the demons, was this world’s hell, then its opposite, heaven, was the continent that played home to the angels: Isla Heaven. Isla Heaven literally looked like a continent that had started floating in the air one day, and as that would imply, it was constantly on the move, never settling in one place. Of course, this land mass was also constantly under the effects of a barrier placed around it by the gods. So it was an invisible, unspoiled land that never appeared in any legends on the surface. This continent was one of miracles, one that knew the presence of no living things beyond angels.

The angels that lived on this continent were subordinate to an almighty will, and they didn’t leave the continent unless there was something wrong with the world. Many spent the entirety of their long, long lives on that patch of land. The almighty will could be said to be the angel’s master, and it was at the same time the world system’s creator, the first Deity of Reincarnation. Ever since the creator had vacated its seat to the second generation, its will had become deeply rooted as the foundation of all angels, ensuring they would remain the protectors of peace and order in the world.

However, something must have gone wrong, as there was an angel who was not quite as affected by this deity’s will as the others. It was unclear whether she was a random mutation or just a weirdo, but the likes of her were only seen once in a very long time. Not one of these strange angels could stand life on Isla Heaven, so they were constantly trying to get off the continent. By her seventeenth birthday, this one girl was the same.

To the angels, leaving Isla Heaven without permission was akin to throwing away their homeland. The floating continent was undetectable from the outside and constantly moving, so it was nearly impossible to track it down and return once you left. The girl knew this, but she didn’t hesitate. Just like a country bumpkin dreaming of visiting the capital, she wanted to experience new encounters, wanted

the stimulation of the outside world.

She had no specific goal, so the spot where she decided to alight was truly chosen on a whim. This random destination was the inlands of the Western Continent, in one of the many small countries located there. Even though she could be considered a heretic among the angels, the girl had some measure of general education. In order to avoid unnecessary trouble, she made sure to take care when she touched down so that she wouldn't be found by any strange people or monsters.

Angels were a race that boasted high individual stats, much like dragons and demons. Though the girl was immature compared to other angels, she was strong enough to settle or avoid most trouble with sheer brute force. However, she didn't want to resort to that because the stimulation she wanted from the surface was of a fun nature, not the bloody violence a harsher solution promised. Since her wings and halo would stand out to those on the surface, she tried to hide them immediately by manipulating her magic in a way she wasn't used to.

"Excuse me, could you tell me where I am?"

"Whaagh?!"

That was why she was so surprised that a human started talking from behind her. At first, the girl could not understand why there was a human male so close to her already. She'd made sure there was no one around when she landed, and even though she'd been preoccupied with turning her wings and halo into magic energy, there was no way she had been so distracted as to let someone get that close without noticing. That was, unless said person had approached with inhuman speed, so fast that even an angel didn't have time to detect him, or unless said human possessed some sort of unfair movement ability like teleportation.

"You don't know?" Mel replied hesitantly.

"No, I don't. I don't remember anything that happened recently. Crap, this is bad. Getting dementia at my age is no joke."

The man, who was currently drooping his head in disappointment, seemed pretty healthy and energetic for the condition he claimed to have. Apparently, he didn't know what she was; he didn't even remember his own name. By the time he'd noticed her, he was already standing in that spot. But for the moment, he was preoccupied with the surprise he'd felt upon seeing the girl's wings and halo, which had yet to disappear.

Oh well, I've already been seen. And he looks pretty harmless, the girl thought. So she decided to put a pause on stowing her wings and halo for the moment.

That was when knowledge from her homeland suddenly came

bubbling up in her mind. She'd remembered what she had learned about the Deity of Reincarnation, who presided over the world and those who were reincarnated from elsewhere. She remembered reading something about these reincarnations being extremely rare cases, and that they would be reborn here in some form or another after their lives had ended in another world.

This was the first she'd heard of one of them losing their memories, but that would explain why this human had suddenly appeared. The girl, having become interested in the man, started to teach him all about the world. Of course, she had only just come down to the surface herself, so her explanations were more than likely filled with theoretical knowledge.

"I can learn my name from my status? Uh...oh, there it is! I see, so my name is Kelvin. Ah, right, what's your name? I don't believe I've asked yet."

"It's a bit late for that," she said with a laugh. "Well, you seem harmless, so I don't mind introducing myself. My name is Melfina, and I may not look it, but I'm an angel! Heh!"

"Well, of course you would be, with that halo and those wings. Is it okay for angels to be out in the world like this? You stand out, don't you?"

"Shut up... You appeared just as I was trying to hide them! Read the room!"

"Don't ask for the impossible!"

From there, they had some arguments, some chitchat, and some planning of what to do in the future. As the two of them talked, they hit upon a single idea: *Since we're both out-of-towners here, shouldn't we stick together?* So for the time being, they agreed on a shared goal: to find a town or village to use as their base of operations.

"You don't have enough reverence for angels! Normal people would feel much more grateful to be traveling with me, you know?"

"You can say that all you like, but...you know my status says I'm older than you. Come on, you should show your respect."

"Sure, sure, my honey. My dear partner who has much weaker stats even though he's older."

"Grrr, you remember this moment when it comes back to bite you! I'm gonna go all out! Starting with reading all about every skill!"

"That'll take up an entire day if you try it. I'll tell you what you want to know while we walk, so let's get going."

And that was how their journey together started.

"Hey, honey, I'm hungry. I need sustenance."

"You're gonna keep calling me that? Too bad—I'm broke."

"Tsk, so I picked the wrong person to travel with!"

"How do you think I feel being stuck with an angel that takes

advantage of other people's goodwill?"

Or rather, *that* was how their journey started. If someone were to ask them what their first impressions of each other were, it would have been "an interesting human who seems like he'd mess up constantly" and "a weird angel who's probably being chased by some country or other." Neither of them would have believed they had just met their soul mate.

From then on, the two ended up staying together, becoming adventurers and forming a party of two. They stayed active for three years, occasionally meeting with hardship due to Melfina's food budget and frequently arguing with each other over their differing ideas. Even so, they stayed together, so they must have had some reason to do so.

"By the way...are you sure you should be leaving your wings and halo like that?"

"Huh?!"



After that first encounter, they spent an entire day walking before finally finding a town. They had a small dispute over the fact that they could have gotten there much earlier by just flying nearby and making sure no one saw them landing.

The next day, the duo headed for the Adventurer's Guild and, after some finagling, formed a party together. Adventurer parties weren't restricted by rank in this age, so they were free to team up and take requests using their own initiative and decision-making.

"Let's take this one, Melfina! It's about killing dragons!"

"Are you suicidal or something, honey?"

For some reason, Kelvin was obsessed with fighting high-difficulty monsters. Melfina snatched him by the back of his collar, stopping him with an expression that said, "The hell do you think you're doing, you Level 1 idiot?!"

She then calmly pointed him towards a blue slime subjugation quest and instructed him to take that instead. Thanks to Kelvin's desires—he had the temperament and eagerness of a lover of violence or a warrior tribesman—all the requests they were taking involved battle. He was able to absorb new knowledge very quickly and could match up to a common adventurer in only a single week.

The two newbies, having proven or improved their abilities in record time, had become renowned at the local guild. All the rumors about them consisted of a monster-fighting fool with rare black hair and an incredible beauty who was sadly a gigantic glutton. If they'd stopped to think about it, they would have realized that a pair like them would naturally be hard-pressed not to stand out. Before they

knew it, they were being treated as an eccentric married couple, though they staunchly denied it.

Together, the duo spent almost the entire day killing monsters and spending any reward money they got on new equipment and the day's food costs. They also made sure to stock the bare minimum when it came to healing items and other basic necessities. These activities were constantly bottoming out their purses, so even though they were earning quite a bit, they were like a burning chariot, constantly falling into unforeseen money troubles.

"You wasted our money again, honey! Didn't you just buy a spare dagger yesterday?!" Mel complained loudly.

"What?! This one's a rank higher than the one I got yesterday! And you're one to talk, with how much you spend on food every day!" Kelvin fired back.

"Eating is a basic necessity of life!"

"And you *necessitate* too much! Just so you know, this dagger is way cheaper than a single one of your meals!"

"Oh no, they're at it again..."

Even though they were earning more than enough for a normal life, they often argued. At this point, their arguments were basically considered a feature of the town, and no matter how fiercely they shouted, it only looked heartwarming to the townsfolk. Of course, they both had ground to stand on.

First was what Melfina had said. Kelvin was an incorrigible battle junkie, but at the same time he was also very picky about his equipment. He would gain inspiration from the materials of monsters he defeated and was constantly visiting the town's craftsmen to see if his ideas could be made into reality. This was all because he'd put all his points into battle-related skills, so he didn't have the ability to make anything himself. Thus, he had to get all these things made to order, which was naturally expensive. Though Kelvin had taken great pains to optimize his build and was getting by, he was still far from where he wanted to be, so he often found himself relying on experts. Impulse buys like the one Mel was talking about were a common occurrence, and that was partially why they never had any money.

Next, Kelvin's point. Neither of them were skillful enough or knowledgeable enough to cook. Melfina in particular was a spectacularly bad chef, so much so that she needed to be forbidden from any kitchen she could walk into. So they naturally found themselves eating out all the time, which was expensive. The truth was, Melfina's food costs outweighed any money Kelvin spent by several dozen times. Melfina would defend herself by claiming this was a normal amount for angels, but that was obviously a lie. Still, her appetite showed no signs of slowing down, and even today, veritable

rivers of food were flowing down her gullet. Thus, it was impossible for them to make money.

“We can’t keep going like this...”

“Things’ll be bad if this keeps going on...”

Both sides recognized each other’s arguments. Luckily for their worries, that was when Kelvin’s growth started to explode and Melfina became even more motivated than usual, so they redoubled their efforts as adventurers. Once they had easily eaten up all the subjugation quests in the town they frequented, they would travel to the next one in search of more pay. Then, once all the notable requests from that town dried up, they would move to the next country. By doing that, the two of them continued to fill their purses and stomachs while satisfying their greed and curiosity. Like that, a fair bit of time had passed since Kelvin and Melfina met.

Two years after they had made each other’s acquaintance, everyone on the Western Continent knew of Kelvin and Melfina. Once, they had consumed a monster that was strong enough to threaten an entire small country. Then another time, they had acted as mercenaries and run through a battlefield. From the perspective of their enemies, they were frightening beyond all reason. But from the perspective of their friends, they were a heartwarming duo who could be teased by calling them an eccentric married couple. At this point, the pair recognized that their friends had hit upon something, so they’d given up on refuting their jabs. In truth, in their mutually recognized need for money, they’d gotten to know each other deeply over the past two years and were now attracted to each other.

“Even after two years, you guys never change. Why not try just being honest with each other for once?”

“Well, there’s no other man who could earn enough money to feed her. Not that I had any choice in the matter,” Kelvin responded.

Melfina also replied at the same time, “And there’s no one of the opposite gender who could possibly understand his *unique* tastes. Not that I wanted to.”

It took each of them a moment to process what the other had said, but then they reacted in unison as they turned to each other. “*What did you say?*”

“Yep, you guys never change...”

As always, both of them were fairly stubborn. However, one day, Kelvin resolved himself, and that night, under the crescent moon, he called Melfina out to a hill where they could see the entire town.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, honey. Why did you call me out here all of a sudden?”

“Ah...well, uhhh...”

“Hm?”

Kelvin found himself unable to speak, as usual. He tripped over his words and faltered over and over again. *Think of this as a fight. Yeah...this is my own personal battle!* he thought, trying to psych himself up.

It was a terribly done example of self-suggestion, but with that, Kelvin managed to steel himself. Taking out a small case from his pocket, he opened it to show Melfina. It contained a ring furnished with a black diamond.

“Oh, honey...this is...”

“They tell me it’s called a black diamond. So, uh...yeah. We’ve been together for a while now, haven’t we? I figured it’s about time I settled—no, that’s not what I meant! Crap, this isn’t like me! I’m gonna just be direct, Melfina! Listen up!”

“Y-Yeah, okay?!”

Kelvin took a deep breath, coughed, and then took another breath. “Let’s get married already!”

Melfina sighed. “Oh, finally. How long do you think I’ve been waiting for you to say that?”

That made Kelvin suck in his breath in surprise, shame, and elation. The two of them embraced under the moonlight and kissed. As their bodies touched, their hearts started beating harder. After a moment, as Kelvin was starting to get overwhelmed by the heated feelings that were pooling in his heart, he finally remembered the existence of the ring.

“Stick out your finger.”

“Okay...”

As Melfina held out her hand to him, he put the ring on her left ring finger.

“Hee hee...you even made the ring black. Your tastes never change.”

“Sh-Shut it...I just happened to see it in the store, okay? Of course I’d like it. Oh...would you have preferred a regular diamond?”

“No, I like this better. It’s something you took your time to choose!”

“I-I see. Whew...”

Melfina stroked the ring on her finger lovingly. She’d never felt so glad that she’d left Isla Heaven as she had that day.

Hmm? Did...the ring just light up? That’s weird... Oh...no. It’s because I’m tearing up. Dear me... Melfina wiped the tears that were building up in her eyes. The ring shone with a strange light after that, probably because it had touched her tears.



Even after being bound together in matrimony, their lives didn’t

change much. They hunted down monsters as usual and ate as usual. They were forever poor, so they never settled down in a single area, instead choosing to freely travel the world, fulfilling their desires as they pleased. Nothing had changed, and they were happy.

However, there were those close to them who sensed that something had changed. More than a few shrugged it off, thinking, *Finally, they've become the eccentric couple we all knew they were.* Melfina never went anywhere without her ring, and even if they had never held a formal ceremony due to their lack of money, their bond was obvious to those with good enough sense. They became even more inseparable and were now seen walking together in town more often than alone, so their love became even harder to deny.

Then finally, three months after that fateful confession...

"The Oracle of Deramis summoned a Hero?"

"Yeah, you didn't know? The news went around a while ago," the owner of a local bar said to Kelvin questioningly.

"Ahh...we were out fighting as mercenaries until just recently, after all. Did you know about this, Mel?"

"Mfwha? (What?)"

Melfina sounded like she'd never heard of it as she turned around with a mouth full of pasta. One of her hands was already reaching for some sliced fruit even though her mouth was still occupied.

"Sorry, just swallow first."

Om nom...gulp!

"Do you mean the fight between our neighbors Bedonia and Nankhua?" asked the bartender. "I thought the war was still going on, but since you guys are here, does that mean it's over?"

"Oh yeah, that's right. We were hired by Nankhua after we ended up rescuing some local VIP from a monster," Kelvin explained.

"I see. You're stronger than you look, then. But you missed your chance. Couldn't you have aimed to rise up and claim a position as an important retainer or something?"

"Can't you tell that we're freedom-loving adventurers? As if we'd ever jump into the political world of those bigwigs. Also, the food in Nankhua sucks!"

"Th-The food?"

"Yeah, it's a pretty big deal. Mainly to her."

Melfina was shoveling food into her mouth faster than before as Kelvin placed a hand on her head, indicating how important food was to her. There were many plates piled up on the table, and she was well on her way to becoming the main focus of the entire bar. The fame the two of them gathered everywhere they went usually started just like this.

Melfina swallowed and took a couple of gulps of her drink before

speaking. "The food's not inedible in Nankhua, but I couldn't stand having to eat it every day. Compared to that, the cooking here's definitely doing something right!"

"S-Sure; thanks for the compliment, m'lady! Want more?"

"Definitely!"

Melfina's eyes shone with anticipation, and the owner was clearly in a good mood after having his cooking complimented by a beautiful girl. *If only she wasn't eating such an incorrigible amount, we could probably convince him to drop the price a little*, Kelvin grumbled in his mind as he looked at the contents of his wallet before turning to continue the conversation.

Right afterwards, a woman who seemed like the owner's wife came from behind to pull him by the ear to the back of the kitchen. Kelvin decided to pretend he didn't see that.

"So, Melfina, what do you know about Demiglace's Hero?"

"It's Deramis, honey. No country with a name that delicious-sounding exists."

"But you think it would be better if that was the name, don't you?"

Melfina's eyes swam away. "No, not at all." As she spoke, her stomach rumbled loudly as a sign, giving away her true feelings. She tried to cover it up by ordering more food, but the owner had already been pulled away by his wife. Melfina pounded the table, doubly frustrated.

"Come on, eat this and cheer up." Kelvin stabbed a fork into one of his meatballs and brought it to Melfina's mouth. There was no hesitation on her part, and the sight of the meatball disappearing in an instant must have looked like a magic trick.

"O-Oh fine, I'll make do with this. So, uh...we were talking about the Hero?"

"Yeah. My impression of Heroes is that they exist to defeat villains who threaten the world. Is that right?"

"Pretty much." Melfina went on to explain, in simple terms, the relationship between the Oracle of Deramis, the Hero, and the Demon Lord.

"In other words, we're lucky enough to be alive for the appearance of a Demon Lord? Oh man, that's a great goal to shoot for!"

"I have no idea what's lucky about it, and I'd rather you didn't set goals like that, please. Defeating the Demon Lord is the Hero's job, not some random adventurer's. Like I just said, the Demon Lord—"

"Has a Unique Skill called Mara Pisuna, which makes him impervious to normal attacks, right? Which means defeating one requires power from another world, which a Hero has. But think about

it: if we become that Hero's companions, we'll gain that effect!"

Mel thought about it for a moment. "Don't you mean, 'If we're lucky, we'll be able to fight the Hero too?'"

"You really are my wife! I didn't even have to say it!"

"Um, well, that's only a matter of course as your wife. Yep."

Melfina swallowed another meatball, which had been thrown into her mouth. Not only was she feeling happy about hearing the word "wife," but her stomach was also filled just enough for her to be totally on board with whatever.

"From what the owner of this place said, it's been a little while since the Hero was summoned," Melfina continued. "It depends on how many Heroes Deramis's Oracle brought over, but they should be spending some time training first."

"Which means they're probably still in Deramis."

"Exactly. Whereas if they were to leave on their journey to defeat the Demon Lord, they'd be much harder to find. Either way, Deramis is on the Eastern Continent. I think it'll be best if we head there as fast as we can while gathering information on the Heroes."

"I see. The Eastern Continent, huh? We're gonna have to save up for the boat fare..."

"We need to hurry as fast as we can if we want to make this a sure thing. We absolutely cannot waste money."

Shipbuilding had yet to develop much in this age, so passage on a vessel that could travel between continents was very expensive. Considering that, Melfina offered a stern warning even as she used a fork to try and spear some food on Kelvin's plate.

Thunk.

However, her fork only hit empty plate, and the high-pitched sound mercilessly announced that there was nothing left. That was when Kelvin gently placed his hand on her shoulder. This action was even gentler than when he had taken her hand, as well as more compassionate.

"If I'm going to have to suppress my desires, so will you, Mel."

"I'll get one less helping per meal, so please..."

After some negotiation, their plan to get to the Eastern Continent was decided. Kelvin was now banned from buying new weapons and armor, impulse buys, and every other luxury purchase of that manner. Melfina was only allowed three meals a day (snacks could be negotiated). For each meal, she was only allowed up to five large extra servings (subject to further negotiation if she found herself on the verge of starving to death).

"Okay, let's do our best to save up money to head to the Eastern Continent!"

"Urghh...the world is so cruel..." Melfina mumbled.

“Come on, now; you got a way better deal than I did. Look, compare how strict your restrictions are to mine! Hey, don’t look away!”

After surviving the hell of having limited portions, Kelvin and Melfina set out for the port town to buy passage to the Eastern Continent. The curtains had opened on what would inevitably be a death march for the angel.



The blue sky and blue sea stretched as far as the eye could see. Migratory birds flocked above, almost as if they were running with the boat. Yes, the married couple was on a boat. After cutting out any extraneous spending and other expenditures for a week, Kelvin and Melfina had somehow gathered the money they needed to pay for a ride.

“Urghh...I don’t feel great...”

“How are you this weak on boats when you’re fine flying through the air?”

Melfina was in the midst of being terribly seasick. It had been a mere three days since they’d departed the port on the Western Continent. According to the captain, they weren’t even halfway to their destination yet. Once they had saved up the money they needed and bought their passage, they’d decided to treat themselves, so Melfina had spent every day since eating her fill, which was probably why she was currently seasick. However, it seemed she still had some stress she wanted to let out, since she was stubbornly refusing to throw up any of the food in her stomach even though she was seasick.

“I know we prepared beforehand by feeding you extra so we couldn’t cause any trouble with you starving on the way there, but...please consider how I feel having to sleep next to you. It’s terrifying that I have no idea when you’ll end up barfing...”

“I-I’m fine. I would never do something...that wasteful...urrrp!”

“It’s looking to me like it’s only a matter of time, though.”

Actually, Kelvin and Melfina had ended up as on-call guards for the boat in the event that they were attacked. Since they were hired hands, they didn’t actually have to pay the fare, and now they were sitting on a pile of saved-up money. So, while feeling grateful for all the fame they had built up as adventurers, they had tried to figure out what to do with the money. In the end, Kelvin’s will had crumbled in the face of Melfina’s puppy-dog eyes and all their extra money had turned into emergency rations for Melfina. Withdrawal symptoms are scary.

“The trip has been safe so far, but make sure you’re ready in case we’re actually needed, okay? You look like you’ll take fatal damage

just from trying to jump.”

Kelvin was resourceful enough to earn money anywhere, if needed, especially if there were monsters about. After all, he knew he would need to recover lost funds for the sake of his hobbies. However, even he was worried about whether or not they could do their job with Melfina in her current state.

“Don’t worry...honey... I have a...good idea...”

“I see. Then why don’t I hear you out and find out exactly why I shouldn’t feel worried?”

“It’s simple. You can just take care of all the monsters I can’t...urp... You’ll be able to fight even more monsters than usual...and I’ll be able to avoid a disaster. It’s a win-win...a perfect solution...”

Kelvin couldn’t help but heave a sigh after hearing her idea. “I see; you’re totally right!” A sigh of admiration, that is.

The reason this type of “smooth talk” even worked on Kelvin was because he had a very special type of illness. In truth, Melfina didn’t want to treat her husband this way, but she was still a woman as well as an angel, a species that served deities. More than that, she just wanted to stay clean and pretty in Kelvin’s eyes, although...to be fair, in that case, she could have not overeaten instead.

“It’s a monster! A monster’s heeeree!” a sailor cried from the deck.

It was time for the pair to go to work.

“Aw yeah! I’ll go earn us some cash. You just rest here, Mel.”

Kelvin turned towards the commotion. “Wait for me; I’m coming!”

Kelvin grabbed his sword and all but flew out of the room. Meanwhile, Melfina felt a small amount of guilt as she saw her husband off. *Should I suppress my appetite a little? But if I try to hold back, I’ll end up in withdrawal. Hrrmmm...*

The journey continued as the boat was assailed with disaster after disaster. From being assaulted by a giant squid to encountering a ghost ship and taking their cannon fire, they were met with a variety of threatening enemies they wouldn’t see on a normal voyage. In the end, Melfina’s efforts were in vain, as she never participated in any battles. Instead, a certain strangely excited adventurer did enough work for the both of them. Enough to increase the numbers of tales sung by bards in the pubs frequented by sailors.



Several days later, the ship came within view of the Eastern Continent. Kelvin’s skin was looking glossy and perfect for some reason, while Melfina was still looking somewhat under the weather. Why? It was a true mystery.

“Land sighteeeee! It’s laaaaand!”

“I-I’m saved! No, we’re saved!”

“This is the worst voyage I’ve ever had in my life... How many times did I almost die?”

“You all relaxed instantly... Still, all the monsters were stronger than normal. Is that a sign that the Demon Lord really did revive like the rumors said? I mean, people were saying that Deramis summoned a Hero.”

“Who knows? I’m more scared because I’m going to have to calculate how much the repairs to my ship will cost. Well, at least we’re still alive! We’re drinking today, boys!”

The ship was filled with cheers and cries of relief. Even people who looked like hardened veterans were covered in wounds, and the sections of the ship that had been patched up through emergency repairs could be counted in factors of ten. It was a miracle that they hadn’t sunk yet, and the vessel would need serious repairs to be seaworthy again. Still, it should hold until they reached the port.

This ship was playing host to quite a number of VIPs as well, and they were greatly impressed by Kelvin’s tremendous exploits during their journey. Thanks to that, he had earned enough reward money to keep himself grinning from ear to ear until now. At the moment, his thoughts were running wild with greedy dreams.

“Ooh, so that’s the Eastern Continent!”

“Yes, we’ve arrived...finally...”

The small port town they were heading to was visible from the boat. This port town was a part of the Holy Empire of Deramis, which was where Kelvin and Melfina wanted to be. From the town, they planned to obtain a carriage so they could travel to the capital on their own. Melfina had predicted that the Hero would be in Deramis’s palace along with the pope and the Oracle.

“So, how are we supposed to get into that palace or whatever? It’s where the top leaders of the country live, right? We can’t just go in demanding to meet the Hero when we’re just adventurers; they’ll shoo us away at the gate. If we’re unlucky, we could even get thrown in jail.”

“Heh heh! Be at ease, honey! I, Melfina, have the perfect idea!”

Melfina hadn’t just spent the entire voyage sleeping. While she wasn’t able to contribute to battle, she had been planning out what to do after reaching Deramis and how to make contact with the Hero. There were already several ideas inside her head by now, and she’d just given one her stamp of approval.

“You’re really confident for some reason... Okay, so what’s that perfect idea of yours, Mel?”

“Don’t rush me, please. We’re still a ways away from the capital. I’ll fill you in when we’re on the road there since we’ll have all the

time in the world.”

“Don’t slow roll me! Come on, at least give me a hint!”

“A hint? Hmmm...fine! Your hint is the same as my race!”

Kelvin had no response to that as he started to get a bad feeling about the plan. It could be said to be part of his instincts as a husband, sharpened by the two years they had been together, or just pure experience, but he knew that whenever Melfina got overconfident, she tended to mess up a lot. At any rate, he was now wary of her trying to enact a rather worthless plan, and he resolved to make sure to wring all the details out of her on the way over.



The Holy Empire of Deramis was home to the Holy Order of Rinne, which worshipped the Goddess of Reincarnation, and was a sacred land that was able to summon a Hero, the only one able to defeat the world-threatening Demon Lord. As always, Deramis was an immutable existence in the world.

“How’re you feeling, Mao?” the current Oracle of Deramis, Cecilia Deramilius, called out to a single young man who was currently training hard in the palace garden. In response, the well-built young man stopped his practice swings and turned towards Cecilia with a smile as he wiped off his sweat.

“Ah, Oracle-sama!” he said. “I’m getting through it, thanks to you summoning me like this. I’m already strong, not to mention, you’re taking care of all my needs too...”

“What nonsense! Everything is because of your incredible talent as well as the results of your hard work! I’ve just been helping you along a little bit.”

“What you’ve been doing for me isn’t helping ‘a little bit.’ True as true.”

Both of them acted humbly towards each other, stubbornly refusing to give up their stances. The black-haired man, Mao, was someone Cecilia had Summoned and the current generation’s Hero. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, and this endless social tug-of-war ended for the moment. If they kept going, they could easily spend the entire day like that, so Mao chose to break the cycle.

“Still, the speed of your growth is surprising, Mao. You’re already basically unbeatable in the Training Grounds of the Guardians even without a party. Ever since I summoned you, your body has been well-built. What did you do before coming here?”

“Ha ha ha! Oh, nothing. If I had to say, my body was just like that from farming. I was the opposite of strong and sturdy in my old world. I was actually pretty feeble, at least until I came here. Ever since I was summoned, I’ve thought it strange how well I’m doing.”

“Oh my, isn’t that just great! Everything is as the Goddess of Reincarnation Elearis-sama willed it! In her infinite mercy, Elearis-sama has seen fit to rid you of your weakness! Yes, I’m sure that’s the case; of course it is! Hooray! Viva Elearis-sama! Let her bring light unto the world! Aaah ha ha ha!”

“Right... I should give her my thanks.”

While Mao forced a polite, strained smile, Cecilia had suddenly gone off the deep end, and her excitement was showing no bounds. She was this era’s Oracle of Deramis and a pure and chaste girl. However, the faith and zeal she felt towards the Goddess of Reincarnation put even the most fanatical zealots to shame, and her shouts at the moment would only continue. Mao knew this side of her and was a little scared of it.

“Oracle-sama! Oracle-samaaa!”

Cecilia gasped as her caretaker priestess came jogging through the garden. “How have you been?” Cecilia asked her. As soon as she heard her caretaker’s voice, her excitement had disappeared and she had returned to her usual neat and clean self. It seemed that she would only allow a certain few people to see her in that state. The suddenness and massiveness of the change somewhat scared Mao as well.

“Oracle-sama, Hero-sama, some...visitors? Have come to meet you...”

“Visitors? I don’t believe we have any meetings scheduled,” Cecilia wondered aloud.

“I’m told they came without an appointment. They’re a man and woman who look like a pair of adventurers, and their names are Kelvin and Melfina,” the caretaker added.

“Kelvin and...Melfina? No, I don’t know them.”

The sudden arrival of visitors made Cecilia suspicious. The fact that a priestess had come to report to them directly only added to that, and now she had to deal with the caretaker as well. Normally the arrival of someone without an appointment, much less someone who wasn’t already known to her, wouldn’t be brought to Cecilia directly. The fact that she had been contacted like this meant—

“Is there something else I should know?” Cecilia asked.

“Well, to be honest, I’m finding myself hard-pressed to believe it, but...the woman is saying that she is an angel and that she has something to tell you as one of Elearis-sama’s messengers. It wasn’t something I could decide on my own, which is why I came to hear your wishes on the matter...”

Cecilia sucked in a surprised breath as her eyes widened a little.

“An angel?” Mao chimed in. “You mean, the antithesis of devils? I don’t think I’ve seen one yet, now that I think about it.”

“They say they are messengers of the gods, so no one would normally see them. What should we do, Oracle-sama?”

Cecilia paused for a moment to think. “If she is a fraud claiming to be an angel, that is a serious crime. That is how holy angels are here in Deramis. Okay, I understand. I will go see her myself to decide. The Great Cathedral should be open at this time, correct? Bring them there.”

“Understood. Should I also bring some knights from the Holy Order—”

Cecilia interrupted the priestess, “No, that won’t be necessary. I have Mao here, after all.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. Now, go.”

The priestess stammered out a hurried affirmative. With her objections overwhelmed by the Oracle’s silent but forceful will, she left even faster than she had come. Once she’d completely disappeared from sight, Mao asked Cecilia a question while staring into her troubled face.

“Uh...I’m happy that you believe in me, but are you sure about this? Having only me as a guard, I mean.”

Cecilia didn’t reply immediately. “It’ll be fine. I’m pretty sure that Melfina is telling the truth.”

“Huh? How do you know?”

“I can tell somewhat, if I concentrate. This feeling, it’s similar to when Elearis-sama manifests to hand down a divine revelation. I believe it will be well worth meeting her. All right, then, Mao, let’s head off towards the Great Cathedral. First impressions are important, so we mustn’t be late. Today could be the most important day of our fated lives!”



Some time after Cecilia and Mao made their way to the Great Cathedral, they heard a knock on the large doors at the entrance.

“Please enter.”

“Excuse us,” came two voices in reply.

It was just as the priestess had said: in came a young man and woman. The man was wearing light armor with black as the main theme and had a longsword at his hip, and his outfit matched the color of his hair. In contrast, the woman wore brighter colors and boasted incredible looks. The fact that she was an adventurer with that face made for a great mismatch in impression.

“Well met, Oracle of Deramis, Cecilia Deramilus-sama,” the woman began. “I have nothing but thanks for your willingness to meet us so suddenly this day. This may be a touch late, but my name is

Melfina. Though I look like this, I am an angel.”

The pair sank to the floor and bowed their heads deeply.

“Please, raise your heads. I am Cecilia Deramilius, and I hold the burden of being the Oracle. The man behind me is the Hero, Saeki Mao. Forgive me for bringing a bodyguard, but I must, given my standing. I trust you will be okay with this?”

“We expected as much.”

“Thank you.”

As Cecilia and the woman named Melfina talked, Mao met eyes with the man in black for a moment. He got the feeling that the man was appraising him for some reason.

“I have already heard about this situation from my subordinate. However, I cannot just take your word for it. Do you have any proof that you are an angel?”

Melfina took a moment to prepare herself. “Yes, I do. Excuse me, but are there any prying eyes?”

“No, I’ve gotten rid of them, so be at ease.”

As if they were simply making plans for the future, Cecilia and Melfina kept the conversation going at a steady and smooth pace. Having heard nothing beforehand, Mao simply stood by protectively while feeling slightly befuddled.

As Melfina silently stood up, magic started accumulating above her head and on her back. This wasn’t something that could only be felt by those who could detect the flow of magic but something that was visible to the naked eye as a blue halo and blue angel’s wings. She looked, quite literally, like an angel.

Of course, Mao was excited about having seen his first angel, but Cecilia surpassed him and then some, flying into the air with a raised arm and cry of delight.



It had been several minutes since that fateful encounter between the Oracle of Deramis and the angel. The saint, worshipped by all the believers of the church, was still breathing hard, but even so, it was a great improvement. Still, it was somewhat worrying.

Cecilia took a few deep breaths to steady herself before saying, “I’m fine now. Sorry for causing you trouble.”

“Oh, well...yeah...”

“I’m...glad that you’ve calmed down...”

They had moved to Cecilia’s private room, located in the Great Cathedral of Deramis. Kelvin and Melfina were sitting on a sofa with Cecilia sitting across from them. Her excitement had yet to die down, and they were honestly a little creeped out. Not even a battle fanatic and a pure glutton had any defenses against an honest-to-goodness

pervert. Mao looked a little apologetic as he sat beside his companion.

“Uh...let’s get back to the introductions! My name’s Saeki Mao. Cecilia’s already said this, but I’m a Hero, despite how I look. Oh man, can you believe it?”

It might have been out of concern, but Mao’s introduction was rather awkward. It seemed he was trying to force the situation back to normal after the Oracle’s passion had knocked it off track. However, he wasn’t used to this role, so he sounded very unnatural.

There was a reason things had gone this way. *Oh, yes...I can recall it like it’s yesterday even now.* Cecilia, with a single fist raised in the air, had started to float higher and higher like she was moving in slow motion. She had traveled quite a distance before landing again, almost as if she had white wings of her own. Then, the Great Cathedral had been filled with her voice welcoming Melfina the angel. The gap between her cute looks and how she was behaving only served to make Kelvin and Melfina’s impression of her even stronger. In a bad way, of course.

However, even if their ultimate goal was to team up with the Hero, defeat the Demon Lord, and even possibly spar with the Hero himself, there was no way they could let all this go with just a strained laugh out of consideration for him.

“Ah, then I should introduce myself too. Once again, my name is Kelvin. Melfina is an angel, but I’m human. I’m also her husband.”

“Huh? Meaning...you two’re married?”

“Hee hee, hearing it out loud is pretty refreshing! We’re still newlyweds, but...yes, I’m his wife!”

“I see... Newlyweds. But from the look of it, Kelvin is the same age as me. It’s amazing that you’ve managed to land such a pretty angel! As a single man, I’m so jealous—truly!”

“Hah! Hah! Hah!” Kelvin laughed mirthfully and with great emphasis. “What’re you talking about? You’ve got great masculine looks, Hero-sama. You’ve got a good build too; I’m sure women won’t leave you alone!”

“No, no, no! Not at all! I’m no good, really!”

“Hah, don’t be modest!” Both Kelvin and Melfina replied in unison.

The uncomfortable mood turned on its head, changing into a friendly, harmonious one. Melfina blushed bashfully and Kelvin looked impish. In contrast, Mao looked down humbly. It was a very tender scene. Still, it mustn’t be forgotten that there was one more important character here.

“Um...are you truly married to Kelvin-sama?”

Cecilia’s whole body was shaking as she asked Melfina the question with a hollow look in her eyes. The other three must have

felt that something was up, since the tender mood they were sharing quickly dissipated, and now they all had cold sweat running down their faces.

Melfina tried to form as natural a smile as she could before saying, "Um...yes...that's correct."

"How can this be?! An angel, a messenger of the great Elearis-sama, is married to a human, a mortal like me... How could... How could—"

"Cecilia? Let's calm down for now. Take a deep breath. Would you do that for me?"

Mao tried to lay his hand on Cecilia's shoulder, but before it could land, she stood from the sofa and raised her fist to the heavens.

"How could such a wonderful thing happen?! Different species coming together in harmony, declaring their love to the world, heedless of all who would wish them harm! Ooh, Goddess! It' S aMaZiNg! We have come closer to reaching the truth of all love! This must all be the divine will of the Goddess of Reincarnation, Elearis-sama! This world is filled with light! Yeeeeeeeessss!"

Silence reigned between the other three in the room as they froze in shock. Even time seemed to freeze along with the atmosphere in the room.

Soon enough, Cecilia calmed down. "Whew, I let out a lot of my faith in that one. My apologies for surprising you so much. I have a condition where I'll get excited with all my emotions and I need to release all the pent-up faith I feel once in a while. Even though I just did the same a moment ago... How embarrassing. It seems I was influenced by our fateful encounter."

"No, don't mind us..."

"Everyone has their own individual quirks, yeah..."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry... Our Oracle-sama is... Her faith is much stronger than most..."

Once Cecilia had calmed down, Kelvin and Melfina explained why they had come. Melfina was one of the few angels who had descended to the surface, and she had come with her husband to offer their help in defeating the Demon Lord once they had heard that a Hero had been summoned. As fellow servants of the Goddess of Reincarnation, they wanted to help as much as they could.

She had laid out this proper-sounding reasoning with sublime acting, helped along by the fact that they truly did want to defeat the Demon Lord.

"What a noble goal! I, Cecilia, feel so moved even though I am not worthy!" Cecilia was so excited that she stumbled over her words.

"I feel the same. To think there are those who would want to accompany me on this journey that's nothing but dangerous... I'm so

happy!”

They were truly moved by it, which led to them being grateful in equal measure. Kelvin and Melfina couldn't help but glance at each other upon seeing how easily believed their story was.

Hey, they really believed us. Why does that make me even more worried about the future?! Kelvin signaled with his eyes.

I've heard that all of Deramis's Oracles and Heroes are pretty much like this. All those who serve as clergy to the goddess they worship end up with faith so strong, it's like an illness. It's also been noted that most Heroes are pure of thought. There were some exceptions, but that doesn't seem to apply to Cecilia and Mao, Melfina signaled back.

I...see. So once they understood you're an angel, they started to trust you unconditionally? It looks like we'll have to be on the lookout if we form a party.

I agree. We'll be on constant watch!

And thus ended the couple's short conversation through eye contact.

“Hee hee! It sounds like Mao can't hide his excitement either.” Cecilia giggled. “That's understandable; he's the only Hero, after all.”

“Hm? Was there no one else to form a party with him?” Melfina sounded surprised.

“Not as a Hero, no. It was common for several people to be summoned as Heroes in previous generations, but that only spreads the power around. We decided to summon only a single Hero this time.” Cecilia then proceeded to give a simple explanation of the summoning process.

“I see; so there're multiple types of summoning. Still, wouldn't trying to take on the Demon Lord by himself make for a tough journey, even if the Hero is stronger?”

“We thought about that. At first, the plan was to select a few elites from the knights to make up for the lack of numbers. However, now we no longer need to do that. I would like to ask you this favor personally, Melfina-sama, Kelvin-sama. Please, would you accompany Mao on his journey?”

Cecilia bowed deeply, after which Mao followed suit. Of course, there was only one answer the couple could give.



Kelvin and Melfina had crossed the great ocean to the west of Deramis, but now they were looking at the ocean from on high, and the sight was exquisite. The incredibly blue surface stretched on endlessly, dotted occasionally by boats. But what stood out the most was a single line bisecting it all, a gigantic bridge called the Great Cross Bridge.

“I’d heard the rumors, but it’s magnificent. A bridge connecting the two continents! How was it built?” Kelvin asked, impressed, as he looked at the view to the west.

Hearing that, Cecilia puffed up her chest proudly as she started to explain. “To tell you the truth, it isn’t clear when the Great Cross Bridge was built. It was already there as the current civilizations were being constructed. There’s no literature in existence that has any information on it.”

“I see. Then maybe the Goddess built this amazing bridge.”

“Wai— Honey?!” Melfina exclaimed.

“Kelvin...” Mao couldn’t help but mutter.

“Huh? Oh...” Kelvin finally realized his mistake when he saw Melfina’s and Mao’s stricken expressions, as if to say, “Oh no, he’s gone and done it.” But it was far too late.

Cecilia squealed in delight. “So you think so too, Kelvin-sama!” She continued for some time before finally ending with, “And so, I believe that the Great Cross Bridge is meant as the foundation for all races and peoples to mix and spread their cultures, and as an expression of the Goddess’s love. Don’t you agree, Kelvin-sama?”

“Uh...yeah, I agree...”

“As expected, Kelvin-sama! You possess such a discerning eye!”

A few hours after Melfina and Mao had retreated to watch this from afar while drinking tea, Kelvin was finally released from Cecilia’s grasp. After “enjoying” her impassioned oratory to its fullest, he felt as if half his HP had been shaved away. In fact, he might have actually lost some.

“So, Oracle-sama, what do you mean when you say we should cross the Great Cross Bridge?” asked Mao, stuttering a bit as he awkwardly tried to get things back on track.

“Oh, right. I was supposed to talk about that, but I let myself get distracted and went off on a passionate tangent.” After clearing her throat with a cough, Cecilia pointed to the other side of the Great Cross Bridge. The end of it wasn’t visible from where they were, but it was easy to imagine the Western Continent beyond the horizon.

“I serve as the Oracle, the one who receives divine revelations from Elearis-sama, but to tell you the truth, I do not hear her voice all that often. I must accumulate prayer upon prayer until I am finally granted an audience. Most recently, the place that Elearis-sama pointed me towards was the Western Continent. That is most likely where the Demon Lord is. The ruler of Rizea should help you along your journey.”

“I’ve heard rumors of Deramis and Rizea’s conflicts. Are you sure we’ll be okay?”

The Great Cross Bridge lay between the Holy Empire of Deramis

to the east and the Rizean Empire to the west. Since long ago, both countries had each crossed the bridge once to start a conflict with the other. They could in no way be described as friendly.

“The Hero, ostensibly a representative of Deramis, crossing the Great Cross Bridge could be dangerous in a way. But as long as we don’t know where in the Western Continent the Demon Lord is hiding, you will need to pass through the Rizean Empire sooner or later. I believe it would be best to travel steadily from east to west rather than blindly moving from place to place with no plan.”

“I see. So the Western Continent is where we should be going, huh? Kelvin-san, Melfina-san, the two of you are from the Western Continent, correct?”

“We are. I never expected to be going back so quickly, though,” Kelvin said.

“We came by boat, so this will be our first time crossing the Great Cross Bridge. Only a select few are able to traverse the bridge in this age.”

The great bridge, which connected the two continents, was a very convenient structure. But crossing borders without needing permission was something that only existed in a heaven built specifically for spies. Since that was the case, only those who had permission from both countries *and* were of a high enough standing could make use of the bridge. No adventurer of unknown birth would be allowed to use it unless there were some extremely extenuating circumstances.

“I deeply regret that you were forced to do that. The divine bridge should be used to connect people to each other, but in these times, when it could be used as a spark to set off conflict or political strife, it’s not something that can easily be allowed. There are so many fetters when it comes to countries, it’s hard to...” Cecilia lowered her head sadly as she trailed off.

“Now now, this kind of thing exists in my world too, so there’s no need for you to feel guilty about it, Oracle-sama,” Mao chimed in to comfort her. “Even if it’s not possible now, it could be hundreds of years in the future as a sign of friendship!”

After a small lull, Cecilia replied, “I can only hope for that to be true. Of course, I will put forward my best effort during my time as well. Now then, it’s gotten a little chilly, so let’s get inside.”

This had happened a few days after Kelvin and Melfina had met Cecilia and Mao. From there, it had taken another week for permission to be granted to them by the Rizean Empire. Then, after some time to prepare, the day had finally come for Kelvin and the others to cross to the Western Continent.



On the day Kelvin, Melfina, and Mao were to set out to defeat the Demon Lord, a not-insignificant number of people had gathered at the Great Cross Bridge. Present were Cecilia, the Oracle, members of the knights who had taught Mao to fight, and Mao's servants—it was only natural for those involved with Mao to attend, but there was a certain maid who seemed oddly close to Mao no matter who looked and how they thought of it. Mao seemed bashful as he talked to her, and she gave him something that looked like a charm.

“He said, ‘not at all.’”

“He even refused completely!”

“Heh heh! Good. So good!”

Kelvin and Melfina, having gained something to tease Mao about on their journey, looked positively evil. Meanwhile, Cecilia was watching them look at each other passionately—and the people around them all silently decided to pretend like they didn't see anything. This was the historic moment when the Hero was to set out on his journey, so they all wanted it to be as pretty a memory as possible.

Seeming to have finished his goodbyes, Mao returned to where Kelvin and the others were waiting. He looked even more masculine than usual, as if he'd reaffirmed his resolve.

“Done with your little tryst already? You realize none of us know when you'll be able to see her next?”

“That's right! Why not give her a kiss? It'd make for a better story!”

Kelvin and Mao had deepened their friendship quite a bit over the past few days, and they no longer talked to each other in a formal manner. They hadn't completely stopped holding back and being polite, but that was mostly because Mao's politeness seemed to be an ingrained habit that couldn't be rooted out.

“I knew you would say that, but it's still embarrassing to hear. I'm fine; both of us are prepared.”

“Oh come on. Don't prepare yourself for death even before we've set off! That's a bad omen, you know?”

“Aha ha...you might be right. Yeah, I'll definitely make it home alive! Because...th...there's someone waiting for me! I'll fulfill my duty as a Hero, get married, and live a happy life with my family! I'll be part of a great couple, just like you, Kelvin-san!” Mao exclaimed, but Kelvin and Melfina had no words in reply. The silence dragged on and Mao started feeling more and more embarrassed about that statement until he burst out with, “Come on, don't just go quiet like that! You could laugh, at least! Even I know I said something embarrassing just now!”

“No, uh... You know?”

“Right. It’s hard to explain. How should I put it? Uh, yeah?”

Both Kelvin and Melfina stumbled over their words. It made them see for a moment something standing too close and disorderly, and it wasn’t a good sign when they hadn’t even left yet. Still, they couldn’t afford to stop now. Flags that were too obvious sometimes didn’t mean anything after all.

“Please, be careful, all of you!”

With Cecilia’s cheers coming from behind them, the trio left Deramis for Rizea, the country on the other side of the ocean.



Kelvin, Melfina, and Mao walked across the Great Cross Bridge. Flanking them was an endlessly large blue ocean. Since the number of people able to utilize the bridge was limited, they were alone and had the view all to themselves. As they could sit practically anywhere, they were able to start their journey in high spirits.

“Or so I thought, but I can’t see the end of the bridge at all.”

“It connects two continents across an ocean, after all. We’re trying to walk a distance that would normally require a voyage by boat; of course it’ll take a long time.”

“When we started, I thought this view was beautiful, but I’m tired of looking at it now. Hmm, according to these documents supplied by the Oracle, there are campsites spaced evenly along the bridge. It seems that those who cross the bridge in carriages rest at these sites.”

“We could have used carriages? Well, there’s no way VIPs would bother *walking* this distance. By the way, Mao-kun, my friend, can you cook?”

“Cook? Well, as good as the next person, I think.”

“Great!”

“Wonderful!”

“Huh?!”

Mao was confused when his two companions suddenly grabbed him by both shoulders. They then told him that neither of them could cook, so they always had to make do with disgusting rations during their journeys. The fact that Mao could cook was like a miracle to them, and Melfina even started tearing up.

“I don’t think I’m good enough to get your hopes up *that* much.” Their fervor was making Mao nervous, and he stumbled over his words a little.

“It’s fine; you can’t be worse than either of us! At any rate, the amount is what’s most important!”

“Urrgh, finally...finally I can enjoy freshly cooked meals on a journey!”

“Aha ha ha. I’ll...try my best.”

Thanks to the incredible pressure exuded by his two companions, Mao had been successfully coerced into being in charge of the meals.

“Uh...it looks like each country also has checkpoints installed on the bridge in addition to the campsites. The checkpoints on the eastern side belong to Deramis while those on the western side belong to Rizea. We’re coming up on a Deramisian checkpoint. Is that it?”

“Hmmm?”

There was a small fort within view that was sectioning off the bridge. It had clearly been built on top of the original stonework, as the stones making up the fort were off-color compared to the rest of it.

“So, they built a fort on top of the bridge. The soldiers stationed there must have it rough.”

“It is a matter of national security, after all. I’m sure they’ve done the same on the Rizean side.”

“Um, it’s going to be pretty tiring just walking like this all the way to the fort. Should we start running now?”

“Hrm, you’re right. It’s not like the scenery will change, even though it’s majestic. You okay with that, Mao?”

“We can’t just dawdle away our time traveling, so I’m all for it.”

“Don’t get left behind!”

“That’s my line!”

Up until now, the group had been walking along like they were tourists on a vacation, but they suddenly switched to running like hunters chasing down prey. There were no obstacles in their path, and the Great Cross Bridge offered a straight line to move in, so it was like the perfect racetrack. The three of them reached their top speed immediately, and they left gale winds behind them as they proceeded.



Though a great fuss had been raised at the Hero Mao’s arrival, the three of them were able to easily pass through. Since they’d been given a share of the fort’s food supplies, Melfina was in great spirits. It seemed their journey was getting off to a perfect start.

After leaving the fort from the other side and returning to the bridge, they passed several campsites. Since the sun was starting to set, they decided to stop and rest at the next site they came across.

“It’s great that we have both a roof over our heads and something to warm ourselves with. It looks like there’s a barrier laid over the bridge itself too, so we shouldn’t have to worry about being attacked by monsters.”

“It’s both safe and relaxing!”

It was basically unheard of to be able to spend such a peaceful and easygoing night while on a journey to hunt monsters. There was no way to know where monsters were lurking in the thick vegetation

of the animal trails, and while some monsters shied away from any light an adventurer may use, others would head towards that light eagerly.

Compared to a normal journey, the Great Cross Bridge was the very picture of safety. The road was protected by the divine, so no monsters would appear, and there were even safe rest spots left behind by previous travelers. To an adventurer used to journeying hand in hand with danger, the bridge was like heaven. Traveling across it was way too easy to be called a trek.

“Now then, since we’re done with dinner... Ta-da!”

“Oh, there it is!”

Melfina produced a canteen from her bag, which had a storage function. She poured a tea made with apples, lemon, and honey into cups for all three of them. Even though she was absolutely no good at cooking, it seemed she was at least able to craft drinks like this as an offshoot of her ability to mix potions and medicines. The taste was surprisingly good, and it was great at helping the drinker recover from exhaustion.

“Wow, this is great!”

“Hee hee hee, there’s seconds if you want it.”

“It’s basically the only good thing Mel can...make? Still, she’s not the only one who’s happy to be able to eat good food during a journey. In the end, eating is one of the basic human desires!” Kelvin ended his sentence with a feminine lilt.

“You were sounding a bit weird at the end there, honey.”

The three spent a relaxing time chatting. Because they were over the ocean, their surroundings were very dark, their only source of light being that from the campfire. The atmosphere was a rather peculiar, calm one.

Suddenly, Mao began to speak as he looked at Kelvin,
“Um...Kelvin-san...”

“Hm? What is it?”

“To tell you the truth, there’s something I’ve been wondering ever since we met...”

“Ah, sorry; I don’t swing that way. I mean, you know I’m married to Mel, right? Not that I intend to say anything about your preferences, Hero-sama.”

“You’ve got it all wrong! I’ve got Emily waiting for me too!”

“Oho, so that girl’s name is Emily! Hey, Melfina, jot that down!”

“Right, I’ll make sure to never forget it!” Melfina grabbed a notebook seemingly out of nowhere and wrote “Emily” in neat letters on it before showing it to Mao.

“Please stop teasing me like that... I was wondering if you were Japanese, Kelvin-san!”

“Japanese?” Kelvin and Melfina answered in unison.

Having had his question echoed back at him, Mao started to explain while feeling a little confused.



“You’ve got the same rare black hair that I do, Kelvin-san; that’s why I wondered about it. Before I was summoned to this world, I lived in a country called Japan. Almost all the people there had black hair, and you seem Asian to me, Kelvin-san, so I was thinking that you might be—”

“Really now? Then there’s a chance that I’m...‘Japanese’?”

“You definitely might be, honey!”

“Uhhh...what’s going on here?”

Kelvin and Melfina updated Mao on the details of Kelvin’s story, from Kelvin meeting Melfina to the fact that he had no memories from before then to the possibility that he had been reincarnated.

Mao sighed before saying, “So that’s what happened.”

“Normally, both those reincarnated from another world and those who were unwittingly teleported here should retain their memories. His case is quite mysterious.”

“Well, it’s caused me some trouble, but it’s all good now, so who cares? I have a wife, and I’m happy with my current life. I’m not all that worried about my memories at this point. More importantly, Mao, how did it feel to teleport to this world? Did it feel like the universe was bending around you?”

“Hmm...I wonder. By the time I noticed, I was face-to-face with a beautiful goddess, and she was talking about giving me special powers —”

Their conversation continued for a while after. They swapped many unique stories, ranging from the time Melfina had eaten so much that she’d stacked empty plates all the way to the ceiling, to the fact that Kelvin’s habit of sharpening his beloved sword every night with a creepy smile on his face resulted in the guards being called on him once, to a legend from Mao’s family whose descendants occasionally disappeared once every few generations only to show up later on, married. And just like that, the night wore on.



The group expected to have some trouble with the Rizean checkpoint, but when they reached it, they were surprisingly let right through. In fact, they were given a welcome comparable to the one they had received at the Deramis checkpoint. The locals seemed very happy about Mao’s arrival.

“Sure, given the relationships between our countries, things might be a bit difficult for those up top, but to grunts like us, the presence of a Hero is greatly comforting. Good luck killing the Demon Lord!” one of the soldiers explained.

“Yes, I’ll give it my all!” Mao replied, heartened by the reception.

Pretty much all the others felt this way as well. The Hero was a welcome presence for the citizens and soldiers of Rizea. The group almost hoped to be able to ride the reception all the way to the king's throne room, but they were coldly turned away and told that greetings were not necessary. It seemed the leaders, at least, would react just as they had expected.

"That reminds me, what kind of country is Rizea?"

That was the question Kelvin posed as they were taking a break from their exploration of the capital in a bar. The overwhelming impression they'd gotten during their stroll through the city was "bright and flourishing." The cityscape was well maintained, the shops were abundant, and the people were all smiling. There were many dishes to choose from in the restaurants they visited, and all the cooking was quite good. It seemed the city wanted for nothing, and it looked like the country was doing very well for itself, although that only applied to the capital.

"It's an imperialistic country that absorbs the countries around it using overwhelming military force. It's the second biggest, if not the biggest, country on the Western Continent as well. The state of the capital only proves that."

"I see... So it's a standard empire, basically?"

"I've heard that the territories that bend the knee aren't treated that badly. At the very least, they won't starve or die from famine. Of course, that's the sort of thing that tends to change along with the country's leaders."

"I'm not really on board with the conquering other countries part, but it's nice that they've got enough to eat. It's painful going hungry." Mao must have been reminded of something, as he got a faraway look in his eyes.

Kelvin noticed this, but since he couldn't puzzle out what the look meant, he decided to move the conversation forward. "Well, good on Deramis for being able to stand up to such a powerful country. From what you've been telling me, they've fought before, haven't they?"

"Deramis is on a separate continent, after all. Also, since the only point of contact between the two nations is the Great Cross Bridge, that's the only place the two armies will meet if they fight. Building ships to board and land on another continent is even more trouble, so it's better to use those ships to fish."

"Don't forget, Deramis is the headquarters of the Holy Order of Rinne. If the empire was to openly make an enemy of Deramis, they'd have to deal with all the church's believers all over the world. Rizea is home to believers as well, so I'm sure they would rather not be in conflict with Deramis, if possible."

"Man, religion is scary. Still, Mao, are you sure you're all right

with all this conquering of territory? This is just my one-sided impression, but I expected Heroes to be go-getters who love peace and are incorrigible softies.”

“Uh, okay? How should I put it... It’s not easy for someone like me who just popped up out of nowhere to say something about conflicts between long established countries—especially in terms of who’s good and bad. If I really wanted to intervene, first I’d want to seriously build up my base of knowledge. The world I was in also had many wars. Even the country I lived in waged wars, some of which are going on even now. Oh, of course, if I see something unforgivable happening right in front of me, I plan to stop it, okay?!”

Both Kelvin and Melfina were speechless. Kelvin had a blank, surprised look on his face while Melfina was simply absorbed in her food.

“Um...what’s wrong?”

“Oh, no...I was just thinking you’re really farsighted for someone the same age as me. Yeah, I think you’re right. If only Mel and I were as calm and collected as you, Mao.”

“Huh? Why am I included in that?!” That got Mel to look up from her meal.

“The fact that you didn’t expect to be included makes me doubt your sanity.”

“Ha ha. What’re you two saying? You’re both way more reliable than someone like me.”

After that, the three finished their meal and headed to the Adventurer’s Guild. They wouldn’t get anywhere with their search for the Demon Lord without information, so they decided to rely on the well-traveled wisdom of many an adventurer when it came to searching for something: doing quests to earn living expenses while combing through all of Rizea. It was the perfect plan that would allow Kelvin and Melfina to fulfill their desires while also carrying out Mao’s duty.

With that in mind, Mao registered as an adventurer, and Kelvin immediately ran around gathering all the subjugation requests. His face as he came back from the counter was one of perfect contentment.



“Amazing! We’ve got a big haul today too!”

“Now we’ll be able to get extra helpings at dinner!”

It had been a week since Melfina, Kelvin, and Mao arrived in Rizea, and the two adventurers were living very fulfilling lives. They were in a new land facing unfamiliar and uncommon monsters, and they had their choice of equipment and food in the capital. Not only

that, the quality of both sectors was exceptional. The food in particular wasn't just delicious; it was the best they had ever tasted. Kelvin and Melfina were enjoying every new day and had actually been forgetting their original purpose in being there.

"Um...it's great that the two of you are happy, but we haven't gotten any new information on the Demon Lord, which is our all-important goal..."

"Ah!" they both cried in unison as they finally remembered. That was how they were brought back on track.

It'd be nice if they calmed down a little, Mao thought.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Rizea's huge and spread over so many territories; there's no end to all the monsters we can hunt. I couldn't help myself," Kelvin apologized.

Mel followed suit. "I'm the same. Sorry..."

"Don't think of it. It's not a bad thing, so you don't need to feel *that* guilty. Just...we've been all over Rizea this past week, but we haven't heard anything about the Demon Lord or anything of that nature."

"Not just the Demon Lord, even hearing about thieves is rare. This place is really safe."

"To be fair, isn't it a pretty tall hurdle to be looking for a Demon Lord no one knows about with no hints at all? The Oracle only said she was told that it would be on the Western Continent, and we just figured Rizea was our best shot, right?"

The title of Demon Lord was something meant to indicate the holder's potential for causing disaster rather than an indicator of their race or name. It wasn't guaranteed that an evil person would become one, just that the possibility was much higher. As long as that individual had enough power to shake the world, it didn't matter whether that power was their own or came from a group they led, or even an entire country.

If this Demon Lord was on the resourceful and cunning side, they would definitely be running their schemes from the shadows. And if that was the case, Kelvin, Melfina, and Mao would be utterly helpless. The only thing they knew was that the Demon Lord would have a Unique Skill called "Mara Pisuna."

"Yeah...it's impossible." After spending some time trying to brainstorm, Kelvin gave up.

"The future's looking grim," Mao agreed.

"If only we'd been pointed to Abyssland, we could just defeat every demon we lay eyes on. That way, we'd eventually get to the Demon Lord."

"I think that's also a pretty barbaric and forceful way to go about things, but...oh, right!" Mao perked up. "This is perfect. I have

something I need to tell you two! Oracle-sama left me this tool...uh..."

He lifted up the leather string he'd been wearing around his neck, revealing a necklace that had been hidden by his armor.

"What's that?"

"An ancient stone called a 'heaven's scale crystal.' Apparently it's a one-of-a-kind national treasure of Deramis. We should be careful handling it."

"Oh no. We can't let it break, can we?" Kelvin remarked.

"It's pretty! But isn't it a little clouded?" Mel pointed out.

"I've been told that the closer we are to someone who's pure evil, or in other words has the highest chance of being a Demon Lord, the darker it will get. I've been looking at the crystal every now and then as we've traveled, and it *has* gotten cloudier since we reached the Western Continent. That confirms the Demon Lord is here! But now we have to use this to figure out where on the continent they are."

"So we'll know if we're close!" Kelvin and Mel cried in unison, standing up as they did so.

"Exactly!"

All three of them shared a moment of joy, feeling a ray of light shining down upon their darkly clouded future.

After a moment, though, Kelvin couldn't help but remark, "Still, wouldn't it have been better if you'd told us about this earlier?"

"Uh...sorry about that," Mao replied. "You two were so caught up with hunting monsters that I couldn't find the right time." He trailed off at the end, sounding guilty.

"Well, when you put it like that, we can't exactly blame you!" Kelvin laughed.

"Right!" Mel agreed.

The two reflected on their behavior but had no intention of changing. Mao then explained further, saying that during their week of traveling Rizea's lands, the crystal had yet to become significantly more clouded in any one territory.

"If that's the case, there might not be a point in searching around Rizea," Melfina said. "I don't like the idea of parting with this country's cooking, but why not move on to the next one?"

Kelvin thought about it for a moment. "No, there's still one place I want to check out. Let's do that before we leave since we're here anyway." He pointed down the main road of the capital, towards the castle where the king of Rizea resided.



It was currently two in the morning, a time when Rizea's booming capital was relatively quiet. The only noises that could be heard were the drunken laughs of bar-goers and the voices of bards reciting heroic

tales. Those who had jobs during the day were already sleeping and dreaming. The moon was hidden behind clouds, so it was darker than usual that night.

“Kelvin-saaan, are we really doing this?” Mao whined plaintively.

“Hey, don’t speak too loud! There’re still guards around at this hour,” Kelvin whispered back.

Melfina added her two cents. “Let’s just get this over with. Check it quickly and if there’s nothing going on, we should run as fast as we can.”

Three suspicious shadows were attempting to scale the walls of Rizea’s castle under the cover of night. The male-female pair in the lead used the bumps in the wall as hand- and footholds, climbing with practiced ease. The last figure, a second male, lagged a little behind as he climbed as best he could.

The trio, who had each leveled up their Covert Action skill to B, would be hard to find even if a watchman were to stare directly at their location.

“Hup! Hah! Hwup!”

“Cha! Shu! Men!”

The two figures in front were whispering their own unique climbing chants, and they had already almost reached the top of the castle walls. Only rock-climbing pros or famous thieves would be able to scale a wall this quickly and skillfully.

Why are they so used to this? thought a certain Hero who was using his exceptionally strong physique to its fullest but still barely keeping up. He was most likely correct to question it.

It goes without saying, but the ones climbing the walls were Kelvin, Melfina, and Mao: the Hero’s party.

“Great! We’ve reached the top. Now...” Kelvin said, immediately casting his mind to the next step.

“You can do it, Mao-san,” Melfina whispered in a teasing tone from the top.

“Just a little more... A little...more!”

“Okay! Here, take my hand.” Kelvin reached out to Mao.

The Hero grasped his companion’s hand firmly and was pulled up to the passage on top of the wall. He stood there, panting for a while before saying, “Th... Thanks...”

“Hey now, out of breath already? We’ve just gotten started with the break-in.”

“I’m...not great with heights. Couldn’t even climb trees properly...”

Rizea’s castle was built on a steep, treacherous cliff, so nothing but a sharp drop lay beyond the walls in every direction aside from the main entrance. The biggest protuberances on the walls were moss,

as even the seams of the bricks were cleanly and carefully erased so that climbing it was basically impossible. That was why the castle was famed for being impenetrable.

However, it seemed that no one had expected someone to brute force the issue like an idiot and climb all the way up from the bottom of the cliff. The trio had even taken the trouble of making small holes in the wall themselves to use as hand- and footholds, turning the sheer climb into something more akin to walking. Mao was admirably squeezing out every last drop of bravery in his body to counteract his fear of heights as he used the small fingertip-sized holes made by his companions to climb.

"I took some time to observe things from the top, and it looks like the guards patrol at a set time and pace," Melfina announced. "The next round will be here in less than a minute, so we should hurry."

"As long as we aren't fully exposed right in front of them, our using Covert Action should keep us from being found," Kelvin added. "We should hug the inside of the wall first, then cover the courtyard and castle proper and infiltrate through a window or something."

"So now we have to go back down..." Mao grumbled despondently.

"There's no time to whine. Come on, let's get moving."

Since they didn't have to contend with a cliff as well, the married couple knew the descent would be much shorter, so they eagerly got to it. Mao followed suit, leaving the passage and getting onto the inner side of the wall, all while trying to look down as little as possible.

"How're you feeling, Mao? You got to the top, so I think the effect of the barrier should have weakened somewhat, but..."

There was a reason they were trying to infiltrate the castle. In chess terms, the castle was the king. And in shogi terms, it was the fortress protecting the king. The castle was exceptionally solidly built, and the size of the country generally determined the strength of the barrier around its castle. Just like its walls, the barrier around Rizea's castle was of a rare strength and size almost unseen anywhere else.

Kelvin was in possession of the Analyze Eye skill at Rank S. Using it, he had appraised the walls and learned of their properties. The barrier around the castle wasn't physically defensive, but it had the power to suppress anything powered by magic. Basically, they had to figure out a way to overcome the barrier if they wanted the crystal given to them by Cecilia to be of any use.

The barrier was just big enough to cover the entirety of the castle's grounds. Meaning, once they got inside the walls, they'd be on the other side of the barrier as well and would be able to use the crystal.

If the crystal were to change color a little, the plan was to

infiltrate deeper following the steps that Kelvin had laid out earlier. If the crystal showed no change, they would simply leave. The only traces they would leave behind were the divots dug out in the wall, which were too small to be noticeable.

“Uhhh... Aah!” Mao checked the heaven’s scale crystal and let out an uncharacteristically surprised sound. “I-It’s a hit! The crystal—it’s darker than it was in town!”

“Seriously?” Kelvin and Melfina reacted in unison.

Mao seemed terribly excited as he showed them the crystal. It had still been somewhat clear in town, but now it was a dull black. He was right.

“No way, we hit the jackpot on our first country. I’m not sure if I should be happy or if I should regret not saving the best for last...” Kelvin muttered.

“Honey, if you do that, you’re giving others the chance to steal your treat from you, so you should always eat the best first!”

“Please don’t treat the Demon Lord like a strawberry on a cake,” Mao whined. “Still, this confirms the Demon Lord is here in Rizea. Ha ha, I think I’m getting kinda nervous.”

Mao could tell that he was visibly shaking. It was the most obvious in his arms, and he was close to falling off the wall. It looked to him like Kelvin was also shaking, but that was most likely from excitement. His warrior’s soul was trembling with the thrill of the fight to come, and it was resonating throughout his body.

“Mao, I know well how strong you are. It’s been two years since I became an adventurer, and I haven’t met anyone stronger than you. Have confidence in yourself.”

Mao breathed in deep, grateful for the boost. “Yeah, okay!”

The trio knew each other’s stats already. Kelvin, Melfina, and Mao were all over level 90, and Kelvin had yet to see anyone with stats higher than theirs. That was why he felt Mao showed promise and why he also looked forward to the fight with the Demon Lord that was most likely to come in the castle.

“Then it’s time to look for that lovely little Demon Lord,” Kelvin happily stated. “Mao, will that crystal get even darker if we get closer?”

“Well, hmm...it’s not fully black, so I think it will.”

“Okay. If we can narrow down where the Demon Lord is to a smaller area, I can use my Analyze Eye to look for that Unique Skill. Let’s maintain Covert Action and steadily figure this out.”

“Yes, sir!” the other two whispered in unison.

They dodged the prying eyes of the patrols to enter the courtyard before infiltrating the castle proper through a window. The effect of the Covert Action skill coupled with the darkness of the night was

unbeatable, and they were able to get wherever they wanted without trouble. As they searched the castle grounds, they eventually drew close to the upper levels.

“Kelvin-san, the reaction is strong here!” Mao cried.

“Here?” Kelvin checked the map of the castle that he’d “borrowed.” “Ahh...this floor holds the private rooms of the top brass.”

“Sounds like exactly the kind of place to find a Demon Lord.”

“But won’t the security get even stricter from here on out?”

“Well, if that’s how things shake out, we’ll just have them sleep until morning. I’d like it if there weren’t too many lazy guards.”

“Please try to settle things peacefully...”

It seemed the plan was to knock interlopers out. Mao tried to calm down Kelvin, who was already cracking his knuckles. Mel watched from the sidelines with an amused smile on her face.

But the end of their journey was surprisingly close.



“Gah!”

A guard fell limp after taking a chop to the back of the head, but he was grabbed by Kelvin before he could hit the floor. Kelvin lay him down quietly and checked the surroundings once again. The floor around him was covered with the bodies of unconscious guards.

“Is this the last one?” he asked.

“Looks like it, I think. I know you haven’t killed any of them, but should we really be hurting them like this?” Mao replied hesitantly.

“We’re already trespassing, so I don’t think there’s any point in worrying about that. As long as we can defeat the Demon Lord and use that as an excuse, it should be fine. We can just say the soldiers fell asleep on the job. I’m sure they can at least cover up that much.”

Mao nodded. “Rizea definitely wouldn’t want to make it public that the Demon Lord was in the castle. I understand; we just passed by some sleeping soldiers. We haven’t harmed anyone. That’s the story.”

“Their discipline must be sorely lacking if everyone was asleep,” Melfina commented. “Those who work need to make sure to take a proper rest outside of work hours; that’s just common sense.”

“But what’s not common sense is people like you, who sleep way too much. Anyway, Mao, where’s the room we’re looking for?”

“Uhhh...”

Mao checked the heaven’s scale crystal as he walked around the floor. He was covered to the front and back by Kelvin and Melfina so that they would be harder to ambush. After making a circuit around the floor, Mao stopped in front of a particular door.

“It’s here,” he said, his eyes on the crystal in his hands. “The

heaven's scale crystal is darker here."

"The prime minister's room, huh? So the Demon Lord really is a bigwig."

"If the Demon Lord isn't specialized for combat, we might be able to catch them sleeping and finish this nice and easy," Melfina noted.

"Melfina, I'm not sure an angel should be saying that..."

"He's right. If he's not specialized for combat, there wouldn't have been any point in coming."

"That wasn't my point!"

Leaving the bit they were doing before charging in on hold, the group finally entered the room. It wasn't locked, so they were able to get in easier than they had expected. The three acted as quietly as possible, with Kelvin in front as they stepped into the prime minister's room.

There was a canopy bed in the center of the chamber, and in that bed rested a middle-aged man with a...*well-fed* physique. Beside him lay a woman who could easily be described as beautiful. What they had been doing before going to sleep could be left to the imagination, but suffice to say, they were both naked. If the situation had been business as usual, the more innocent members of the party, starting with Mao, would have averted their eyes. However, the circumstances would not allow that.

The woman was dead, completely shriveled up. There was a hole in her neck like something had been stuck inside to suck her blood out. Her head had been left as it was in life, which possibly showed a fair amount of skill if it wasn't by chance. Still, everything below the neck looked like it belonged to a mummy. There was no other way to describe this beauty's death than "cruel and unusual."

"It's confirmed. He's got the Mara Pisuna skill," Kelvin announced.

"Then, he really is..." Mao trailed off.

Kelvin drew the longsword at his waist and pointed it at the Prime Minister. "How long are you gonna pretend to sleep? I've never heard of a vampire that sleeps at night, Prime Minister-sama!"

"Keh keh! I thought you were assassins from an enemy country. Looks like I was wrong."

They heard a man's voice, but the prime minister's mouth wasn't moving. Instead, the canopy of the bed was moving like jaws, and it even sprouted some vicious-looking teeth. The soothing form of a bed was quickly replaced by a monster with a gigantic mouth. The pair on the bed were no longer lying sideways but rolling around on the monster's tongue.

"Pretty cheap of you. Are those supposed to be bait or something?" Kelvin taunted him, pointing at the bodies.

"Keh heh. Oh, I just felt like being playful. It was a bit noisy

outside, so I was lying in wait for you. But the Hero was an unexpected surprise. Even after I went through the trouble of barring you from the castle so I could spare you, I never expected for you three to sneak in. Do you want to die by my hand that badly?"

"No. We came to kill you. We will end you here for many reasons, including avenging that girl over there. Prepare yourself, Demon Lord!" Mao's Holy Sword Will changed into a giant sword. It was the first time Kelvin and Melfina had seen it take that form, but it was the one that Mao was most proficient with.

Mao's words gave the former bed pause. "Demon Lord? Keh heh, I see. You're right; my name is Davai. I have come from Abyssland to the surface, and I am the most worthy of being called the Demon Lord whom all humans fear. I was very surprised, you know? Compared to the underground's denizens, surface dwellers are much weaker and more pathetic. Even those in charge of a country this large weren't able to tell that I'd switched places with the prime minister. I have no idea how you peons managed to find me, but once you die, nothing will change."

"If you can kill us, that is," Mao shot back.

"Heh ha ha! At least you can talk, Hero! Well then, come at me!"

"Allow us!" Kelvin and Melfina shouted, their voices overlapping. They were already right in front of Davai when their words reached his ears.

Davai grunted in surprise as a spear and sword came swinging down for the canopy that served as the vampire's upper jaw. Both tore through their target and continued to slice apart the bed beneath.

Davai let out a pained groan, but just before the bed's large mouth was forced closed, the eyes of the prime minister inside snapped open wide and red as he rolled out and avoided being crushed.

"Oh? Looks like this bed is already near dead," Melfina commented.

"I knew it; that thing's just an underling. Mao, the chubby one over there is the real vampire!" Kelvin shouted.

"Leave him to me!" Mao wasted no time in swinging his giant sword at Davai's real body, which had rolled out of the bed. However, Davai proved to be more agile than he looked. He easily made a leap that seemed impossible for someone of his build, breaking through the window while pulling off a brilliant backflip and escaping outside.

The room was on the upper floors of the castle, so the only thing beyond the window was the big blue sky. Davai spread a pair of wings he had been keeping hidden and comfortably soared away.

"Heh ha ha ha ha! You're better than I expected! But my true battlefield lies in this great sky! Now then, will you be able to keep up with me—"

Spaaang!

After making his escape into the air, Davai tried to turn around to the window, but one of his wings was severed by Mao. The Hero had chased after him without hesitation, and he, too, was currently flying. There was no sign of his previous fear of heights anywhere, and his eyes were locked onto Davai.

“How... How is that possible?!”

“It’s more than possible. Don’t get surprised by something like this.”

It wasn’t just Mao. Kelvin and Melfina had also moved to flank Davai to the left and right, ready to attack at any time.

The ability to fly could certainly be said to be a threat to humans. However, Kelvin and Mao possessed the Sky Walk skill and were able to run through the air, and Melfina was an angel so she had always been able to fly even without manifesting her wings. The reason she had bothered to climb the walls first was because she didn’t like to stand out. At this point, the ability to fly offered no advantage at all.

Unfortunately, Kelvin’s eyes were filled with disappointment. He had already lost interest in Davai.

“Mao, we won’t do anything. You go and finish off that overconfident ass.”

“You!” cried Davai. “I will show all of you the power of your betters—”

“Sorry for interrupting you so much. It’s already over,” Mao informed him.

“Huh?”

Mao’s holy sword flashed as it cut through Davai’s fangs, bisecting him horizontally through the sides of his mouth. The vampire had easily been defeated on his home turf without being able to show off his stuff. He fell, his remaining wing flapping in the wind, to the courtyard below. In a show of bad luck, he fell onto the sword of a statue of a knight who was raising his sword gallantly. The stone sword pierced all the way through Davai’s body, as if adding a follow-up attack just in case.

Before long, the trio could hear the tumult caused by soldiers inside who had heard the sound of the fall.



Demon Lord Davai died while impaled on the statue. Though his corpse was still twitching, it was just residual nervous reflexes. The upper part of his head with those wide-open red eyes would probably be found by the soldiers after some searching too. Not that Kelvin cared; either way, the Demon Lord was dead.

He sighed. “What a disappointment. Vampires are supposed to be

a strong race, so I was expecting him to do more.” He Sky Walked down towards the castle wall as he complained. Clearly Davai’s strength had not lived up to his expectations.

“But that means we’ve accomplished our goal,” said Mao. “Thank you both so much for helping someone like me, Kelvin-san, Melfina-san!”

“Aw, don’t say that! You’re the one who killed the Demon Lord—just you, Mao!” Kelvin replied cheerfully. “It was pretty—actually, *really*—disappointing for us, but...we got to eat delicious food, so it’s all good. Now you’ve finished your duty as the Hero! It’s time to figure out what you want to do now, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you’re right. I need to decide whether or not to return to my world or stay here, right? I...hmmm...”

It looked like Mao was having trouble making that choice. He was probably thinking of the maid he had spoken to on the day they had left Deramis. But Mao’s family was in his home world. Abandoning it for a girl wasn’t something he could easily decide to do.

“Come on, there’s no reason to fret, is there?” Kelvin said.

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you say on the bridge that members of your family have been going missing and coming back with a wife for generations? Don’t you know what that means?”

It took a moment to dawn on Mao. “Ahhh!”

He was either an airhead or just not that smart. Either way, he clapped his hands together in realization before nodding repeatedly, seeming very impressed. Kelvin shrugged in exasperation while Melfina giggled to herself. It seemed that the Hero had figured out what he would do.

At any rate, the peace of the world had been assured. Now they just had to make their triumphant return to Deramis amid cheers and adulation.

“Ah, right,” said Kelvin. “Before we go back, Mao, I have a favor I want to ask of you.”

“What is it? I’ll do anything as long as it’s within my abilities.”

“Oh, really? That’s great! Then...”

As Mao turned to look at Kelvin with a smile on his face, he found that Kelvin was smiling as well.

“Would you have a duel to the death with me?”

His mouth was twisted upwards into the smile of a berserker. The moment Mao turned around, Kelvin’s longsword left its sheath. The Hero had yet to return his Holy Sword Will to its prior form, so he was able to parry the blow by a hair’s breadth. Still, Kelvin had clearly gone for his neck. If Mao had been even a little late in reacting, he would surely have met the same fate as Davai.

Mao escaped into the prime minister's room. Turning around, he shouted at Kelvin, "What?! Kelvin-san, what's the meaning of this?!"

At the same time, Mao could see that he wasn't the only one who was surprised by his companion's violent actions. Outside the large window, Melfina was clearly shocked as well.

"Honey?!"

"Don't be so surprised, Mel. It was always our plan to fight the Hero, wasn't it? If we keep putting it off, Mao will return to his home world. If I want to fight him, it has to be now."

"But... But still, this is too sudden! You didn't have to ambush him and aim for the kill right away, and if you had asked him for a mock battle, he would have happily agreed! It's not too late; just stop this craziness—"

"You're wrong, Melfina," Kelvin interrupted. "I don't want to just have a bout with Mao. Mock battle? That sort of thing ends the moment someone has the upper hand. It's just foreplay! You know I wouldn't be satisfied with that. I want a fight to the death, where we have to try to kill each other with all our might, squeezing out every last drop of power even if we lose an arm or a leg or whatever! I want our lives to be on the line! To be honest, I was planning to hold back, but that self-proclaimed Demon Lord was so pathetic and I was so disappointed that this was all for nothing... The core of my being wants to go on a rampage, and I'm about at my limit trying to hold it back. Melfina...you understand, don't you?"

"Huh?! Uh..."

Kelvin's uncharacteristic barrage of words left Melfina tongue-tied. Mao was the same, and he was only able to stand there dumbfounded.

Ding-a-ling.

The heaven's scale crystal around Mao's neck chimed. It must have been exposed during their last exchange, as it was openly hanging from his neck as if to assert its existence. Mao couldn't help but look, and he noticed that it was blacker than it had ever been.

"N-No way! The Demon Lord is alive... No, that can't be. It can't! But..."

"Mao, what's going on?!" Melfina shouted somewhat roughly as she floated outside the window. Kelvin, who had just reached the windowsill, flashed Mao a smile as if telling him to answer.



Mao took a moment to steel himself for what he was about to say. “The vampire from before...Davai...he wasn’t the Demon Lord. He was just a monster who wanted to be one by pretending to be the prime minister. The true Demon Lord is...Kelvin-san, probably.”

“You’re lying! My honey said that Davai had the skill that’s proof of being a Demon Lord: Mara Pisuna!”

Melfina belatedly noticed something about her words after speaking them. It was Kelvin who had announced the presence of that skill. It was he who had Analyze Eye. Melfina and Mao had no way of verifying the truth of his words, so only Kelvin knew whether or not Davai had really been a Demon Lord. If Kelvin had already been lying at that point...

“Still! My honey was in our party; we shared each other’s Statuses! I confirmed it with my own eyes—he doesn’t have the skill!”

Of course, Melfina, who had been with him throughout his entire stay in this world, knew his stats. Even Mao was able to look them over. He was surprised by how strong Kelvin was for a person in the level 90s, but the Demon Lord skill wasn’t there.

“You’re right! Totally right! I know! Mel’s always been with me, and Mao’s been in our party since we left Deramis. We know each other’s stats, don’t we? You’ll believe me, right? We’re comrades!” Kelvin paused, seeming to calm down. “But to tell you the truth, it was only recently that I started to awaken as the Demon Lord. The world is so strange, I started to awaken with perfect timing.”

Melfina couldn’t help but ask, “What do you mean?”

“You spent almost the entire trip to Deramis seasick, didn’t you, Melfina?”

“Huh? Ah...” It was the only blank period in their time together: the voyage to Deramis. That was the only time Melfina had left combat entirely to Kelvin.

“At first, I almost thought I had started to get seasick too. It was like I was slowly going insane, I felt so bad. But I figured it out when I started to feel an unreasonable amount of hatred and malice. At the same time, I was gifted with the Disguise skill, something I knew I’d most likely need. I’m sure it was a gift from some fell god. Thanks to that, I was able to easily hide this Unique Skill.”

Then, Kelvin showed his full Status to his party members. There, the skill Mara Pisuna was indelibly written, and as if to hammer the point home, his race read: “Human (Demon Lord).” He had another Unique Skill as well: Wicked Deity’s Wisdom.

“Hey, Mao, this is enough, right? I’m really, truly, very close to my limit. I’m not confident I can keep holding myself back. So... So...let’s kill each other as hard as we can!”



Kelvin, with his longsword in his right hand, smiled at Mao with the edges of his mouth curled up sinisterly as he charged. Mao intercepted the attack with his holy sword. Their blades met, but Kelvin did not stop. The intertwined pair burst through the wall of the prime minister's room into the hallway, swords still locked.

“Grkk! Wake up, Kelvin-san! I... I don't want to fight you!”

“Hey, hey, come on now! Don't be spouting lame, naive lines like that; I'll get heartburn! We were only together for a little while, but I know you. You, Mao, are the type who can pull things off if you have to. Your mind isn't a field of flowers; you're a good Hero who can see reality. You've got the strength to back it up too, so you're a great match for a Demon Lord! Yes, a great match! So let's get to killing!”

“Wh— You!”

Once they'd broken through to another hallway, Mao put his back to the wall as he planted a sharp kick into Kelvin's abdomen, causing Kelvin to suck in a breath in surprise and pain. The recoil broke the wall behind Mao, but for the moment, he'd managed to force Kelvin away.

Mao gasped for breath. “I checked the crystal in Deramis, and no matter how close I was to you, Kelvin, the crystal never went black! It only started reacting this strongly when we crossed into the Western Continent! So—”

Kelvin interrupted to finish the sentence. “So you're saying I'm not the Demon Lord? Ha ha! That's not nearly enough to deny that I'm the Demon Lord!”

His longsword flashed horizontally. Mao reacted, ducking to dodge the slash, but the flying cut that was unleashed ripped apart half the floor. At the same time, the rubble created by destroyed parts of the building fell on top of and among the fainted soldiers scattered in the hallway, causing the disgusting sounds of meat being crushed to reach Mao's ears.

“The fact that you relied so much on that crystal put you one step behind me. I showed you before, didn't I? I have the Unique Skill Wicked Deity's Wisdom. That means that I have a part of the knowledge of all the Demon Lords before me; it's a great skill.”

He pointed to his own head, making sure to wiggle it around to drive the point home.

“Apparently, there was a Demon Lord who got burned by one of those. I was lucky enough to have the details about it thanks to the info I got from my skill. I made use of the lessons taught by my predecessors who were turned into corpses to deceive the Hero—what a great story! What a considerate skill too. Ha ha!”

“Grkkkh!”

The next flying slash was a vertical one that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Mao would have found it easy to avoid, but if he did so without thought, there might have been casualties among the Rizeans in the castle. Instead, he swung his sword with all his might in an attempt to both parry the slash and slice Kelvin's blade.

However, Kelvin's skill with the sword was sharper than expected, and his strike was very heavy. While Mao had succeeded in parrying the slash, he was sent flying by the force of the attack. It looked like Kelvin still had more in the tank too, making it clear that he was stronger than Mao.

"All righty then, let me guess your next rebuttal," Kelvin continued. "I bet you'll say that even if I knew about the heaven's scale crystal, I shouldn't be able to hide a Demon Lord's presence. Hah! You've got it wrong, though. I can. Of course I can! What, did you think that the Demon Lord who got burned by the crystal wouldn't bother thinking of a countermeasure? The heaven's scale crystal isn't infallible; it's not an omnipotent magic item that'll always react if there's a Demon Lord around. Those people from Deramis put way too much trust in it. Apparently, they've misunderstood how it works. That thing only reacts to a Demon Lord's greed."

"What...did you just say?" Mao was shocked.

"It's different for every Demon Lord, from the desire to control to lust... In my case, well, you've been traveling with me this whole time, Mao; I'm sure you can guess."

It took a moment for Mao to bring himself to answer. "You want...a fight?" He took up his sword once again as Kelvin nodded in satisfaction at the answer.

"Before we got to Deramis...or rather while we were on the boat, I stuffed myself as much as I could with battle so that I could control my desire as much as possible. I used the knowledge granted to me in full to lure strong monsters to the boat and defeated as many as I could. Luckily, we're adventurers who specialize in subjugating monsters, so we were equipped with bait and other tools. Thanks to my habit of hoarding that stuff, I had more than enough consumables for the trip. Plus, thanks to us being on a boat, there was no one to interfere. Melfina was down for the count due to seasickness, so it was easy to distract her too. It was truly the perfect environment. Ahhhh, in a sense, that was my paradise... Well anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I had a pretty tough time trying to hold out until you were within reach!"

After processing that huge amount of information, Mao had a question. "And the reason the heaven's scale crystal started to react after we crossed over to the Western Continent?"

"Of course I was near my limits, given how much time had passed.

The countermeasures I'd taken on the boat had started to lose their effectiveness. I tried to hunt as many monsters as I could once we arrived in an effort to control myself, but in the end, I couldn't manage it with you in front of me. I was starving! I was expecting more out of the prime minister once we reached him by following the trail of unexplained deaths of young women, though. I mean, look at how weak he was! That's why I aborted the plan of pinning the Demon Lord title on him in order to feast on you."

With no movements Mao could use as a tell, Kelvin charged right up to him. Though Mao was prepared and his eyes never left his opponent, he found himself unable to react.

"Wha—?!"

"So, hey," Kelvin said, "you've had enough time to prepare yourself, haven't you? Why else do you think I've been droning on and on like this? Hurry it up; I'm begging you here!"

He punched Mao before grabbing his arm and flinging him away back towards the prime minister's room and out of the window. Mao's consciousness was already going hazy at this point, so if he were to fall outside, he wouldn't be in a state to catch himself with Sky Walk.

"Mao!" Melfina's voice rang through his failing consciousness. It came with a casting of White Magic to heal him. Like fog dissipating, Mao's mind cleared and he was once again fully awake.

He sucked in a breath as he came to. "Thank you!" Using Sky Walk, he made a foothold in the air and caught himself.

Melfina flew down beside him. "Sorry, this was all so sudden..."

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. Please calm down and listen, Melfina-san. From what Kelvin-san has been telling me, it's true that he's turned into the Demon Lord."

"That can't be!"

"I'm going to steel myself. It's what Kelvin-san wants too...and more than anything, it's my duty as the Hero."

"You can't! You just can't! Even if he's become the Demon Lord, there's got to be a way other than killing him—"

Kelvin cut her off. "There isn't, Melfina. There hasn't been a single time this disease has been cured ever since the first Demon Lord. So I have no choice but to live as one—that's what Wicked Deity's Wisdom is telling me."

Kelvin appeared out of the dust caused by the falling rubble, looking like nothing but a human. Strangely enough, the words he spoke to Melfina sounded soft somehow. At least, that was how Mao perceived it.

"Honey..."

"Ahh, so you healed his wounds. Thank you, Mel. Now he won't be able to make the excuse that he couldn't bring his best to the fight

because he was wounded. But please, step back now. If you stay there, you might be caught up in the fight.”

“I would like to ask the same, Melfina-san. I won’t ask you to fight alongside me since you’re Kelvin-san’s wife. At the very least, though, retreat to a place far enough away that you won’t be accidentally involved.”

Having been told to retreat by both Kelvin and Mao, Melfina was dismayed. *Kelvin’s a Demon Lord? They want me to shut up and watch their fight? Even if he manages to control himself here, from now on Kelvin will...* Those thoughts swirled through her head, confusing her and preventing her from making a swift decision. Even though she wanted to speak, her mouth was too dry.

“I... I...”



I was unable to do anything. I couldn’t stop them, nor could I leave so as to not get in the way of their battle. The only thing I could do was spin the wheels in my head to no avail. Every thought I had was eventually rejected, and even though my thoughts were leading me places, I couldn’t take the first step to get there. I had never felt as powerless as I did that day.

“Good, good! We’ve finally started to kick it up a notch, even if it’s just one! You can keep going, can’t you?!”

“I’m going to hit you with everything I’ve got!”

They had already crossed swords countless times. They didn’t care where they fought—on the ground, in the air, in the castle—the battle between the Hero and the Demon Lord gradually got fiercer as it wore on.

“Hraaaaghhh!”

“Ha ha! You’ve gotten faster again!”

Mao was exhibiting power above what his Strength stat would suggest and was fighting with my honey evenly, not giving an inch. However, the difference in their abilities was apparent. Honey was using all sorts of methods to draw out all of Mao’s strength and was waiting for him to reach his peak. In short, he still had much more left to give.

Why was there this much of a gap between them when they should have been about equal? The cause was probably the proof of a Demon Lord that had been given to my honey, the skill Mara Pisuna. Every Demon Lord had it, and it was a symbol of all that was evil, taught to all angels from a young age. But this infamous Unique Skill wasn’t just a symbol; it had a great effect in many different ways.

The first was to change the bearer’s personality. No matter who it was, their thoughts, feelings, and ideas would be filled with malice.

Because of that, my honey's sense of right and wrong towards the fights he so loved went out the window as he started thinking everything was right as long as it involved fighting. His reason, which had once put a stopper on those feelings, had been removed from the equation.

The second was to invalidate damage. The only exception to this ability was the Hero, who came from a different world, and those in their party, which meant he could take damage from Mao. In that respect, the ability had no effect on this match.

Lastly, the third ability was to raise the bearer's stats to absurd levels. I didn't know the exact numbers, but I had been shocked when we were shown my honey's stats earlier. Each of his stats had increased by over one thousand. There was no way that Mao, who had been evenly matched with him until then, could serve as a proper opponent now.

Yeah, there's no way. That was why, as an angel who served the divine, I needed to get Mao to run away. The Hero was the only one who could defeat the Demon Lord—basically, the world's only hope. If we were to manage to run now, we could prepare ourselves and get to a level where we would be able to defeat him. It was my duty as an angel to advise him in that regard. It was my duty, but...

"Mao would eventually get stronger and come to kill my honey. I...don't want that sort of future..."

It wasn't just that I was unable to make a decision; I had even abandoned my pride as an angel with a mission. I couldn't help but choose the one I loved over the Hero who had the fate of the entire world and its people on his shoulders.

"Archer squad, Mage squad, volley fire!"

Suddenly, I heard the gallant voice of a man. Turning around, I saw Rizean soldiers deployed along the walls and in the courtyard about to unleash arrows and spells. I hadn't noticed them until the leader shouted his orders, probably because I was so shaken.

It took a moment for the orders the leader had given to sink in for me, so I had to act fast. "You can't!"

They were pointing their weapons and spells at the Hero, Mao, and his opponent, my beloved. We'd been staying here for a week now, and Mao's face should have started to become fairly well-known as the Hero's. Right now, he was putting his life on the line to fight, so the Rizean soldiers were probably attacking under the assumption that he was facing off against the Demon Lord. Deramis and Rizea had a turbulent history, so accounting for that, the decision the leader of these troops had made was most likely an incredibly sharp one.

The attacks were timed for the moment Mao and my honey separated from a clash so that Mao wouldn't be hurt by the attacks.

These high-powered attacks aimed at my beloved were top-notch, as was to be expected from soldiers of the country that controlled most of the Western Continent. However, their strength was a bit wanting if they hoped to damage my husband. Not to mention, normal attacks wouldn't affect a Demon Lord.

"I see... I'm not sure if you did that out of a sense of justice or love for your country, but the fact that you attacked me means you intend to fight me, doesn't it? Then I'm glad. Even if you're weak, you're still warriors who are prepared to die in battle!"

The attacks unleashed by the strongest that Rizea had to offer were all suddenly turned away by a violent gust of wind.

No, that's wrong. It can't be. My honey shouldn't be able to use magic, but that was clearly Green Magic! Did he gain a new skill in this short amount of time? Even if he did, there's no way he'd be able to so freely handle such a powerful spell when he's never even touched magic before.

"I'll return these to you guys."

"Wha?!"

The winds didn't just turn the attacks away; they sent them back the way they came at full power. Magic flames ignited arrows as the projectiles were scattered all over. The same happened with attacks using other elements. The soldiers ended up destroying their castle with their own assault, and several cries of agony and distress were raised. In that moment, the Rizean forces collapsed, turning the scene into one out of the depths of hell.

"How... How could you?"

"That hurts, Mao. They were the ones who attacked me, you know? What's that old saying people use? 'Only kill when you're prepared to be killed in return?' Not that I'm human anymore."

The two looked at each other as the flames spread among the trees planted in the courtyard with their swords at the ready. Naturally, I could feel that the fight had reached its climax.

"Don't be so surprised, you two. This is easily possible by making use of the knowledge given to me by the Wicked Deity's Wisdom. Once you obtain the skill and the authority to control how the spell manifests, all that's left is to let the knowledge of past Demon Lords do the rest. At first, I thought this skill had nothing to do with battle, but it's actually pretty useful, don't you think?"

It took a moment for Mao to respond. "More importantly, Kelvin-san...that spell just now—"

My beloved cut him off. "Yeah, people died. A lot of them, in fact. If you don't hurry up and stop me, more of the ones who stand up to me will follow. Mao, fulfill your purpose as the Hero. The power you have now isn't enough, so you need to use all of your strength, including what you have sleeping within you. If you don't, I'll kill

Emily next.”

That caught Mao by surprise.

How... How could this happen? The magic power surrounding Mao flared, and the prickling sensation on my skin told me that it was increasing at a rapid rate. In that moment, Mao had completely surpassed me. *Is he planning on expending everything in himself during the next exchange? Then the next clash...there's no way to tell—*

Swoosh!

As my thoughts swirled around, the fight concluded. My honey's sword had pierced through Mao's heart. I didn't know if he had been aiming for it or if it was just coincidence, but he'd also stabbed through the heaven's scale crystal Mao was wearing, shattering it.

“Grk...aaghh...ghhh...” Mao gurgled.

Kelvin heaved a sigh. “Thank you, Mao. That blow was just fantastic. But you were one step short.”

Mao's holy blade had stabbed through my beloved's left hand, stopping when it had gone about halfway through. Honey was bleeding heavily, enough for it to be nearly a mortal wound if it wasn't treated quickly, but it wasn't fatal just yet.

With that scene in front of my eyes, the emotion filling me was undoubtedly relief. I was relieved, even while watching Mao die with the disastrous state of Rizea's castle all around me. In the end, the route I'd chosen was...

“When you go back to Deramis, tell Cecilia to use any means necessary to stop me,” Kelvin commanded.

I couldn't help but suck in a breath. Mao's body, which had expired quietly, suddenly shone a bright white. It was so bright that I had to shield my eyes with my hands. But a moment later, the brightness was gone along with Mao's corpse. All that was left behind were the remains of the heaven's scale crystal.

“This... What...”

“Mao's Unique Skill activated. It's called A New Journey, and its effect is to allow him to return to a set location when his HP hits 0. It's a really convenient ability.”

“Return from death? Then...that means Mao isn't dead?”

“Exactly. Isn't that great, Melfina? I'll be able to fight him again, but he'll be even stronger next time. Not only that, but he'll have Deramis's full support!”

I wasn't able to process that right away. “Huh? What? Did... Did you actually know about that skill this whole time?!”

“Mao was unexpectedly careful, wasn't he? He never told us the details of his Unique Skill, but I knew about it already. Well, rather than me, a past Demon Lord who died a weird death did. Oh man, Mao really has so much room to grow! I'm impressed.”

“I...see...”

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

All the tension left my body at once, and I slumped to the floor. My honey hadn’t actually killed Mao. He had killed citizens of Rizea, but that could be categorized as legitimate self-defense. He had just returned their fire after being attacked, after all. He had certainly become a Demon Lord, but he hadn’t changed at his core. *Yeah, he hasn’t changed.*

Now that I thought about it, all his actions up until now could be seen as trying to fight against the malice welling up within him. If that meant he had yet to be completely infected as a Demon Lord, then...

There might be a way to cure him.

I had absolutely no leads to chase to make that happen, though, so in the end I had no precedents to follow. But I had hope.

“Do you not want to fight me, honey?” I asked.

“I do, but...I’d rather just be with you. What’s with you all of a sudden?”

“Nothing, I just felt like asking.”

Kelvin cocked his head in mild confusion. “You’re weird. Anyway, let’s get out of here. We don’t have any business in this country anymore, so let’s hurry and find my next prey. We should go traveling again. You’ll follow me, at least, right, Melfina?” My beloved quickly turned his back to me, probably to hide his embarrassment.

Hee hee, I giggled to myself as my suspicions as well as my future goal were confirmed. As his wife, I would never give up. Even if he were to completely fall into the role of a Demon Lord, I would descend into hell with him. I would never let him be alone. Never...

Hero’s death confirmed. Activating System 13-proxy authority.

Selecting closest angel: confirmed.

Angel “Melfina” approved as proxy.

Limited transfer of chain of command commencing.

Starting transfer of Sacred Treasure: Holy Lance

Luminary...complete.

Smite the Demon Lord.

Huh?

An unfamiliar display had popped up in front of my eyes.

System? Proxy authority? Holy Lance? All of it was unfamiliar gibberish to me. However, I instinctively felt something ominous from the wording.

“Smite the Demon Lord.” Those words, spelled out as if something was commanding me, made me feel terribly unpleasant. I immediately

tried to call out to my honey. However, what moved was not my mouth, but my arm, which held a lance. The lance I was holding was not the familiar weapon I had brought with me from Isla Heaven either, but a divinely shining platinum-colored spear. It was so beautiful a weapon that just catching sight of it almost made me fall in love. And just by touching it, I could feel a boundless amount of divine power.

But it wasn't familiar to me. I had no idea when I had gotten a hold of it. Underneath the elation and fascination, I also felt fear. And while I was certainly conscious, I found that my body wasn't listening to anything my mind was telling it to do. No matter how many times I tried to call out to my beloved, my lips would not move. My body simply continued to breathe as needed in order to sustain life while refusing to listen to a single one of the orders I was trying to send it.

It's as if I've been possessed... A bluish-white light ran across my peripheral vision. This flow of magic... I've manifested my halo and wings, but why? Why now? Once again, I remembered the words I had seen: *Smite the Demon Lord.*

My body said nothing as the tip of the holy lance in my hand slowly, gradually pointed at its target. The motion was exceedingly slow, but it looked like my surroundings were also moving so sluggishly that it was as if time had stopped. In reality, my body and thoughts were actually moving terrifyingly fast.

I had no way of knowing for sure if those mysterious words that had been displayed in front of me had something to do with this, but I knew the message popping up in front of me was not an accident. I just couldn't understand why this was happening to me, nor did I want to.

With his speed, he could react. Why is it now, when he's let his guard down and turned his back to me? No! No, no, no! This is some sort of mista—

“Grghh...aghh...”

The holy lance in my hands struck my beloved's back and pierced through his heart. As the weapon was dyed so, so red, my body moved to finish off my one and only, the Demon Lord. I could feel the urge to retch welling up from deep in my throat, but what actually came out of my mouth was something different.

“Luminary Burst.”

My voice was terrifyingly quiet as I commanded the weapon in my hands to execute divine punishment. The holy lance accepted my order and started to spin, letting out an intense sound along with bright bluish-white light. It wounded my honey's body, gouging it.

Eurrghhkk!



“That was how I killed you, honey. Moreover, the black diamond engagement ring I got from you changed into the Black Grimoire and disappeared somewhere, as if to announce that you’d died. After that, it was just as you dreamed. My wings were stained black and I fell from grace...as I vowed revenge on God, on the world...”

Melfina heaved a sigh as she finally finished her lengthy story. At some point, I had pulled her into a hug in an attempt to quell her trembling as much as possible.



“Thank you for telling me, and well done.”

She took a moment to collect herself before replying, “Yeah, thanks.”

Her story contained a series of surprises. I had lived a life here in this world even before my life in Japan. I had known Melfina back then, and what’s more, I had given her a ring and married her.

Damn, this went way deeper than I had expected.

But the biggest problem was the ending. I had become the Demon Lord and been defeated by Melfina, who had been forced into the role of divine agent. The wedding ring she had treated so precious had turned into the Black Grimoire, and she had lost that too. No wonder she found it too much to bear. I would probably have wanted to throw up at the worst parts too. I only felt it now that I had been told the story and Melfina had regained her memories, but it was only natural that her heart would break. I didn’t even want to consider having to kill the love of my life. I reflexively hugged her closer.

True, I had received a shock from that story. But it was nothing compared to what Mel must have felt. And the story wasn’t over. She had yet to describe how she had become a goddess or the steps she had taken towards revenge.

“Are you okay? Do you think you’ll be able to talk about the stuff that happened after? About DarkMel? If you don’t think you can, we can do this another day.”

Melfina took a deep breath. “No, I want to say it all now. Before you wake from this dream, honey.”

The trembling in her lips had calmed somewhat as she continued her story. I stroked her back, and she began to describe what had happened to her body.

The phenomenon of an angel’s wings being dyed black was referred to as “falling from grace,” and it was a rare thing that only happened when an angel rebelled against God. There was actually no record of it having happened in the long history of the world.

That was because angels almost never left Isla Heaven in the first place, so they had no interaction with other races and nearly no knowledge of the outside world. Mel said that by falling from grace, she had somehow managed to escape a restriction that had been placed upon her by someone or something.

“I only learned this after becoming a goddess, but...the thing that took over my body was a phenomenon that triggers on the off chance that a Hero loses to the Demon Lord. It’s one of the many safety systems layered onto the world.”

“Systems?”

“Yes. The Demon Lord is fated to be killed by the Hero, so the

Hero has never lost. That's what is stated in the records of Deramis, in the records of battles between the Hero and the Demon Lord. However, in reality, the Hero *has* lost, just like when you defeated Mao, honey. In order to defend against such an outcome, the gods created several fail-safes to indirectly intervene. On that occasion, an angel—me—was used as a medium to defeat the Demon Lord in place of the Hero.”

“In other words, it's something like the Divine Pillars placed around the world...so when you say you escaped from it when you fell, does that mean the goddess of the time, Elearis, was no longer able to directly do something to you?”

“In the end, yes. Angels are like a proxy for the divine, or candidates to succeed them. That's why they hold a much stronger connection to gods than other species. I resented God and the world, so by falling, I was released from them.”

That explained why DarkMel's wings were black and why I was seeing a black-winged Mel holding me in my dreams. But that only gave rise to a different question. Why had she become a goddess when she'd fallen? And why had Melfina and DarkMel split? I immediately turned to ask her.

“It's only natural that you have questions. It happened right after I lost you, honey, and I had lost faith in the world. Carrying your body, I hurried to leave Rizea. I had resolved to at least protect your body...and that was when I realized I still had the holy lance, Luminary, which had been transferred to me when I'd become a proxy.”



“Luminary? You mean the lance you're always using?”

“Yes. It was originally a sacred treasure that acted as the opposite to Elearis's Eclipse, and it was handed to me when I was forced to become her proxy.”

From Mel's explanation, I learned that under normal circumstances, the system would have returned Luminary once her duty as the proxy was complete. However, that transfer hadn't happened because she had fallen, thus severing her ties with the divine.

At the time, Mel had reached this conclusion after spending some time thinking about it.

“After I buried your body properly, I started traveling the world in an attempt to evade Elearis's prying eyes. Luckily, I was able to conceal my wings and halo after falling too, so I didn't have too much trouble hiding myself.”

“Yeah, you were level 90 so of course you wouldn't be found by

normal soldiers or adventurers...but how did you stay hidden from Elearis? Wasn't she seriously searching since Luminary had disappeared?"

"Even though she's a goddess, she's not all-powerful. She can't come down to the mortal world unless she uses an artificial body, so she can't directly defeat the Demon Lord or anything like that either. Even using me as a proxy to indirectly intervene took a lot of power. In other words, it was like a trump card. It should have been all she could do to send a revelation to Deramis's Oracle after a while, to try to use human hands to search for me."

"Ah, right. I'm reminded that gods have it hard. Your artificial body was so good, I'd forgotten, Mel."

"That's because the body was made from Elearis's. Yes, it really was very good. Too good..."

Don't feel down. Don't, I thought as I held her tight. "So, what happened next?"

There was a pause before she continued. "My first thoughts went towards revenge. Against Elearis...against the world... After that, I spent the next few decades running with Luminary in my hands, gathering power little by little while being careful to not step out onto center stage. All I had inside of me was a black flame, and the only comforts for my heart were the mementos you left behind."

That struck me speechless, but Melfina continued on.

"At one point, I wanted to become a Demon Lord too. I wanted to walk the same path you did, and I knew once I became a Demon Lord, I'd have the power to raze the world and take my revenge on Elearis. And more importantly, I thought I'd be able to find your engagement ring again. But then, one day, I realized revenge was just an act of self-satisfaction. Even if I got it, it wouldn't bring you back. I thought, even if I took my revenge, it wouldn't make you happy."

"I see. So that brought you back from your fallen state?"

It seemed that decades, a lengthy amount of time by human measurement, were enough to calm Mel down and bring her out of the depths of despair and hatred.

So that's when she decided to change the world for the better? And that led to her aiming to become a goddess?

"Ah, uh, no. I just thought that rather than becoming a Demon Lord and destroying everything, it would be better to become the Goddess of Reincarnation and bring you back to life. I also thought I could make a dreamlike world filled with the high-level fights you loved so much. Uh, so...I was still fallen."

Once again, I was speechless but for a different reason. *So you thought of something even more amazing with the composure you regained, Mel. Not gonna lie, I'm real happy about that, but... My wife's*

imagination was way more active than I'd expected.

"I understand why you wanted to become a god. But is that really something so easy to do that you succeeded just by deciding to go for it? I don't really know any of the details..."

"You're right. Even if I was an angel, becoming a god wasn't as simple as *deciding* to become one. When trouble occurs with the current deity and whoever it is finds themselves unable to continue, the leaders of the angels convene to make a decision about which of them will become the next Deity of Reincarnation, replacing the retired god."

"Retired sounds strange for a god... So the angels decide when a god retires?"

"To be fair, I took a paid vacation to travel with you. Uh...put in modern terms, it's like holding a general meeting of stockholders to vote on forcing the company director out. Something like that?"

So while angels are subordinates of a god, at the same time they're the god's watchers?

Mel continued, "Of course, everyone who becomes a leader of the angels is horribly mechanical, like a robot. They don't have an emotional bone in their body when it comes to work."

I felt I had to ask about a possibility. "What if they actually are robots?"

"They look the same as you and me. But your emotions are stripped from you when you become a leader so that you can always make the right decision and not favor any relatives or anything."

"Wow, doesn't angel society sound harsher than the demons?"

"Still, it's an honor for angels. I didn't feel that way, but those who want the position would accept it happily."

That's the same mentality that drones in a black company have. Why are angels so different from how I imagined?!

"In order to drag Elearis out of her position as Goddess of Reincarnation, I needed to force her to cause some sort of problem. So I turned my attention to the Divine Pillars, the system she installed into the world herself."

"By Divine Pillars, you mean like the wolf that Sera fought and Gaun's Divine Beast?"

"Yes. The Divine Pillars aren't just meant for the Demon Lord. They also exist to combat those who exist in a place the Hero cannot reach, as well as protect the world from evil monsters. That's the sort of system they are."

"Evil monsters? That's kind of vague. It activated at Sera's touch too."

"Uh, well...that was my fault..."

What?

“While I was in hiding and gathering power, I learned how to use Luminary. As you know, honey, this holy lance has the power to sever evil emotions for good as well as the ability to directly smite evil. What I found was a way to use that first ability. If it’s possible to cut the evil away from a target, where does that evil go? Can you guess?”

“If it gets purified, doesn’t it just disappear?”

“No, it doesn’t. The evil doesn’t get purified and disappear, it gets sealed by Luminary. The lance has a purification function much like the Black Grimoire—it purifies little by little over time. Yes, it works very slowly, and I set my eyes on what had yet to be purified.” She paused for a moment. “Those pitch-black emotions taken from evil beings... I wondered if I could implant them in others.”

Mel had told me before that one of the reasons Elearis had lost her position was because of the Divine Pillars. *Could it be...*

“Just as I suspected, it was possible. Well, it was only that way because I’d fallen. After that, I spent time searching for the Divine Pillars and using this power to inject each of them with pure malice. After a while, the Divine Pillars started going crazy, causing incidents all over the world. It went as I planned: the Divine Pillars attacked everyone, regardless of whether they were good or evil. Though today they’ve lost most of their power, at the time, they had as much power as I did as a proxy of God. This was categorized as an emergency, so the angels were mobilized and the incident was brought to a swift close, but the damage was still catastrophic. Then, the leaders made their decision. Elearis, the one responsible for the Divine Pillar system, would step down as God!”

That was the reason Elearis had lost her position. The Divine Pillars, which she had made, had been used by Mel. Yes, I knew this wasn’t the time to bring it up. Mel was fighting through her embarrassment to tell me everything.

I am not a Demon Lord in this life. I’m a high-functioning battle junkie. I can pull off that much understanding—

“The old Divine Pillars, how strong were they? Super strong? Better than Dragon Kings?”

I couldn’t help myself.

“Sorry, I couldn’t hold myself back. Please continue.”

The fact that I could reflect on my actions proved that I was high-functioning. I couldn’t deny that I’d ruined the serious mood, but it was also to help calm Mel’s nerves. That’s right, everything was calculated!

“Uh...so, the leaders all decided to make Elearis leave her position as Goddess of Reincarnation...”

Mel was hesitating. I had managed to kill the serious mood, but I had accidentally also shaken her. Oh man, that’s gotta be an

aftereffect of becoming the Demon Lord. Probably...gotta be. Not confident about it, though.

“Oh, but you were still in a fallen state, weren’t you, Mel? How were you chosen as the next deity while you were like that?”

“I’ll take you through the steps. First, I’ll talk about how the next deity is chosen. As I’ve told you already, they’re chosen from among the angels in Isla Heaven. This is based on purity of heart, goodness of behavior, and abilities. The leaders choose someone who would not let the position go to their heads.”

I had no reply to that. She seemed to sense my internal struggle, though.

“Did your head just fill up with a bunch of doubts?”

Mel probably got full marks in the ability department. However, if anyone were to ask me if her heart was pure when I knew she was living purely on hatred, I wouldn’t be able to answer them. Also, her actions were the biggest problem. There were her bad sleeping posture and waking habits, the inconsistencies in her lifestyle, her gluttony...

Yeah, uh...there are nothing but problems.

I said none of that out loud, though, instead opting to go with, “No, no doubts at all. Please continue.”

“Nothing but problems? You just thought that, didn’t you?”

I said not to read my mind!

“Whatever, just shut up and listen to me.”

“That’s what I was doing...”

“What did you say?!”

“Sorry!”

Now I was being yelled at for some reason. *Well, I guess it’s fine as long as Mel is feeling better.*

“Ahem! There were two obstacles to my goal of becoming the Goddess of Reincarnation.”

Only two? Ah, no...it’s nothing.

“The first was that I had to return to Isla Heaven from the surface somehow. Isla Heaven is a continent that’s constantly moving through the air. It also has a large barrier around it, making it impossible to be noticed from the outside. That goes for me as well, even though I’m an angel.”

Mel said that before, didn’t she? That leaving Isla Heaven basically means throwing away your homeland.

“So, how did you do it?” I asked.

“I used the angels who were dispatched to stop the Divine Pillars. Even though it was an emergency, they would normally also find it impossible to return to Isla Heaven once they left. That’s why Elearis undid the barrier around the continent only during their deployment. While the angels were fighting against the crazed Divine Pillars, I

returned to my homeland.”

Oooh... Damn, that DarkMel has a surprisingly good head on her shoulders. Every one of her actions was linked to something else, something that would be unheard of today.

“Honeyyy?”

“Ow! Owwww! Don’t pull on my ear!”

Dammit, she’s totally back. She’s completely able to read my mind...

“The second problem was that I was still fallen, and my heart was pitch-black. In a sense, that was a bigger problem than the barrier.”

“I bet. There’s no way you’d be chosen like that. In the first place, you couldn’t allow yourself to be found.”

“That’s when I had an idea. I thought of a way to solve it using Luminary.”

“Luminary?”

“Since my heart was full of grudges, I realized I could use Luminary to cut my evil heart out of myself...or that was the idea.”

Mel couldn’t have become the Goddess of Reincarnation if she had stayed a fallen angel. That was why she had planned to cut her evil heart out with the holy lance.

I get the idea behind it, but wouldn’t that excise her knowledge of the goal behind becoming God too? If the resentment and pain that were the fuel for her actions were to disappear, she wouldn’t think to bring Elearis down, and she wouldn’t try to build my ideal world either.

“All angels other than the leaders have emotions as well as some amount of evil in their hearts, no matter how small it might be. If I were to use the power that I took from Elearis, my heart would be left completely pure and it would be a large first step towards being nominated by those machinelike leaders. It would also connect to getting me the qualifications to become God.” Mel paused as she acknowledged my doubts. “As you’ve pointed out, honey, it was a huge gamble for me. But this was my thought process: the white me would become God while the black me would lie in wait inside of Luminary. When the white me once again took Luminary in hand, the black me would be able to slowly but surely eat away at the white me. That being said, there was no guarantee that my black version’s consciousness would be maintained inside of Luminary. If things went wrong, it was possible that my other half would be weeded out in the name of purification and disappear.”

“But DarkMel succeeded. She maintained her sense of self inside Luminary until you became the goddess and now has her own body.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Mel responded, trailing off uncomfortably.

The story stretched over such a large amount of time that I was starting to feel faint. Even though she had crafted such a finely tuned, meticulous plan, the last step had relied entirely on luck.

Well...she might have had the confidence to pull it off—the kind of overwhelming confidence that knows that such a thing won't affect her sense of self and that there was no reason to stop at that point.

“Just as I, or DarkMel, planned, I was chosen to be the next goddess. I believe the reasons for that were my great achievements in defeating the Demon Lord and returning with Luminary, and the pure heart I had gained by using Luminary on myself.”

“Then you started to influence yourself through Luminary, I take it?”

“Yes. What would normally be impossible was allowed in that case, probably because we had originally had the same body. Just like I am currently taking advantage of DarkMel's sleep, she used me as well. Unbeknownst to me, she reincarnated Elearis's soul and used her body to make an artificial one. I attended my duties as the goddess all while DarkMel plotted and furthered her ambitions behind the scenes.”

To sum up Mel's story: DarkMel, unable to leave Luminary, used her while she was sleeping. Her first act was to reincarnate Elearis as Iris so that she would have a pawn to act in her place. From then on, Iris used her Reincarnate ability to increase the number of Apostles at her beck and call, all of whom DarkMel used as her limbs in the mortal realm. That would eventually connect to Ange and Serge.

With her foundation set, DarkMel reincarnated “me” next. She'd figured out that I was in Japan and killed me under the guise of an accident. That's right, I had apparently been murdered in my past life. According to Mel, who was gleaning this information from DarkMel's mental state, she had wanted to see me so much that she couldn't wait and used all her authority as the Goddess of Reincarnation to call my soul over.

That revelation was pretty shocking. Though I was fine since I had lost all my memories, if I had kept them, I'd probably have been pretty shaken. Back when I had first been reincarnated and met Mel, she had told me that I'd died because of some mistake. As it turned out, that mistake was DarkMel, who had fabricated embellished memories, which she made Mel believe and relay to me.

At this point, DarkMel wasn't being choosy about any of her methods, it seemed. Even if she were to have to kill me with her own hands for the second time, she wouldn't hesitate for the sake of her goals. Knowing that was heartrendingly painful to me, but I could also sense the love she felt so strongly that it was uncomfortable. It was a love unlike the one I had with Mel, one that was strange and warped.

Then came the final move. In order to gain a physical body, she had used Mel's special artificial body by leading her to the Apostle's stronghold and pillaging her. Though DarkMel looked like a child, she

was in possession of the best body possible, made from Elearis's flesh. That was the truth behind everything.

After giving me a moment to allow me to think, Mel spoke up. "Honey, it's about time. DarkMel is waking up."

I was able to talk to Melfina in my dreams, but I guess that's it for now.

"Then...once DarkMel goes to sleep again, we can continue—"

"It pains me to say it," Melfina interrupted, "but talking with you like this isn't something I can do all the time. I don't know when I'll be able to come see you like this next without her noticing. I'll upload all the information on the Apostles I got from sharing her memories to the Follower Network. It would have been best to tell you directly, but there's no time, so please make sure to read it."

"I see..." *I'd thought we'd be able to meet in my dreams any time, but I guess the world just isn't that convenient.*

"Please don't make that face; it's not like you." Melfina took a breath and looked right at me. "Listen here. DarkMel's goal is to make a world that you'll enjoy, honey. Now that you have no real enemies on the surface, she's going to bury you herself. Then, she'll reincarnate you once again and repeat the loop. Basically, she plans to pull you out of the normal cycle of reincarnation for her own purposes and have you enjoy your perfect life in her world."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Ha ha! That sounds perfect...but she's also an idiot. She always only thinks about me."

"Yes, truly," Mel said. The way she trailed off sounded somewhat ashamed.

Before waking up, I made sure to hug Mel one more time. "But still, it's partially my fault for the way things turned out. DarkMel is a side of you too. Being adaptable enough to love her too is one of the traits that makes a good husband. So I'll enjoy what she's going to prepare for me before destroying her stupid ambitions. It's my job to warn my wife if she makes a mistake, isn't it? No matter how powerful and scary she is."

Melfina frowned, sounding somewhat miffed as she responded, "But I'm a good wife."

"Yeah, I know. I know."

Mel must have felt jealous of herself, since she puffed her cheeks in displeasure. Then, she buried her head in my chest to stop me from seeing the cute expression she was making.

What a waste.

"That reminds me, what happened to Mao after that?"

"Elearis handed Cecilia a revelation telling her that the Demon Lord had been purged, so Mao went back to his world with that servant."

“I see, so he went home. Wait, he just took the servant girl back? That dog...”

I hadn’t personally met Mao. But somehow, I couldn’t think of him as a stranger, probably because of his birthplace.

“Mao was worried about you to the end, you know? It’s funny, isn’t it? Even though you two were fighting to the death.”

“No, I don’t think it’s strange at all. He’s just that kind of guy, or that’s the feeling I got. By the way, about Mao...is Saeki—”

Mel interrupted me, “Honey, you should be asking Rion that question. We only have a little time left to be together. Please, let’s just stay like this.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right.” *Not being able to touch or talk to the one I love at any time is such an irritating feeling. When will I be able to see her again?*

I could barely stand to say it, but I had to. “Looks like it’s time.”

“Indeed, honey. I know I can’t be of any help and it might be irresponsible of me to say it, but I’m leaving DarkMel to you.”

The world around us started to twist. It seemed that DarkMel was well and truly awake now. *Wow, she’s just like Melfina. Her waking up makes me both happy and sad in equal measure. What a troublesome princess.*

“The War Poet strikes again...”

“Stop reading my mind!”

I woke up along with that shout, having been unable to even say my goodbyes.



“There he goes...”

Kelvin disappeared from the dreamworld, leaving Melfina alone. The beautiful garden started to crumble from the edges as the water in the fountain evaporated. Waking from a dream also meant the destruction of the dreamworld. Having no physical form, Melfina’s consciousness had stayed in that space as everything returned to darkness. All she could do was wait there, alone in a world with no light or sound.

There was one thing that Melfina hadn’t said to Kelvin. She’d never mentioned that she was in a truly dangerous state. Now that her artificial body had been stolen and DarkMel, her other personality, had manifested, her own existence had become incredibly weak. If DarkMel were to succeed in reaching Isla Heaven and truly become the Goddess of Reincarnation, it was possible that Melfina, as she was, would disappear altogether.

However, she had decided not to tell him in the end. She knew that if she had, Kelvin would have thrown his life away to fight for

her. What was important right now wasn't for him to attack with reckless abandon out of concern for her but to make the proper arrangements and prepare for the final battle. He needed to gather the power necessary to oppose DarkMel.

Also, she simply didn't want to get in his way, although that was just her personal feeling on the matter. At the moment, she was sharing DarkMel's memories and being influenced by both her good and bad sides. Wanting to make Kelvin happy, wanting to bring him joy, wanting him to laugh...all of that was shared between Melfina and DarkMel, and Melfina didn't want to waste all the sacrifices that had been made already to bring this situation about. It was a very selfish feeling, and if Kelvin were to know about it, he'd probably be angry. That was why she couldn't tell him...because she loved him from the bottom of her heart.

"It's like our positions have been completely reversed from when you were in Luminary, DarkMel. But you toughed it out without being purified, with burning hatred in your heart all the while. So I'm going to do my best too. Not with hatred, but with hope that my honey will come for me."

Knowing that her voice would most likely reach no one, Melfina slowly sank into the darkness, alone.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing *Black Summoner 12: Black Pierces the Sky*. I am Doufu Mayoi, a man who is enjoying indoor life to the fullest. To everyone who read the web novel version and still bought the book, thank you for your continued patronage. Times are tough in a lot of ways, so I am glad if my book brings even a little bit of joy to people.

This marks volume 12 in the saga of Kelvin's story. Finally, we're coming to the heart of the conflict. It really feels like things are reaching a climax! But, leaving that preamble aside, I wanna talk about Gerard! I've shouted about this in the comments behind the cover too, but the image of Gerard on this cover is so cool, it's criminal! Makes sense, because you could definitely say that Gerard is the protagonist for the first half of the book. And the illustrator managed to do the best job possible. Oh man, it's cool enough that I want to just prostrate myself in front of both of them and thank them profusely for their work. That's how good it is! This tofu is very pleased! Okay, let's calm down...look at Prettia's muscular form for a bit. At this rate, I'll spend the entire time talking about nothing but Gerard.

Finally, in the next volume, we'll be diving into what was labeled the final part in the web novel. Still, since this part is the longest of the series, I think it'll span several volumes. It'll be nice if things go smoothly until the final book... Right, I'm gonna work my hardest while looking at Prettia's incredible body!

Lastly, I would like to thank Kurogin and DaiXt in drawing an incredibly stylish Gerard for the book. I'd also like to thank my proofreaders, and let's not forget all of my readers as well.

Well then, I pray I'll see all of you in the next volume. Please continue to look forward to *Black Summoner*.

—Doufu Mayoi

■ KELVIN CELSIUS

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / DAEMON / SUMMONER

■ LEVEL: 174

■ TITLE: GRIM REAPER

■ HP: 8715/8715 (+5810)

■ MP: 27666/27666 (+18444)

SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP -100

SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP -1000

SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP -1000

SUMMONING MEL (□ BODY): MAX MP -5

SUMMONING ALEX: MAX MP -1,000

SUMMONING DAHAK: MAX MP -1200

SUMMONING BOGA: MAX MP -1200

SUMMONING MDOFARAK: MAX MP -1200

■ STRENGTH: 1707 (+640)

■ ENDURANCE: 1477 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 2839 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 4084 (+640)

■ LUCK: 3393 (+640)

■ EQUIPMENT

BLACK STAFF OF DISASTER (RANK S) MAD HOLY SWORD CLIVE (RANK S)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) SKILL EATER (RANK S)

ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S) BLOOD PENDANT (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S) BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF THE DIVINE BEAST (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

MAGIC OVERCLOCK (UNIQUE SKILL)

PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK S)

SUMMONING (RANK S) [AVAILABLE SLOTS: 2]

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)

ANALYZE EYE (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE GODDESS OF REINCARNATION DISGUISE (RANK S)

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/ABSOLUTE PURIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

SKILL EATER (LEFT)/AUREOLA BELL (UNIQUE SKILL)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

DISGUISE (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

SMITHING (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

SPIRIT (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

DOUBLE EXPERIENCE POINTS

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

EXPERIENCE SHARING



■ EFIL

- 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HIGH ELF / BATTLE MAID
- LEVEL: 174
- TITLE: BOMBING PRINCESS
- HP: 1641/1641
- MP: 5537/5537

- STRENGTH: 761
- ENDURANCE: 740
- AGILITY: 4928 (+640)
- MAGIC: 3797 (+640)
- LUCK: 2227 (+1862)

■ EQUIPMENT

- PENUMBRA (RANK S)
- MERCILESS (RANK S)
- BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)
- BATTLE MAID HEADDRESS V (RANK S)
- GLITTERING MAGICAL JEWEL HAIR CLIP (RANK A)
- BLESSED SLAVE COLLAR (RANK A)
- GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)
- LEATHER BOOTS OF THE FLAME DRAGON (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

- BLUE FLAME (UNIQUE SKILL)
- ARCHERY (RANK S)
- RED MAGIC (RANK S)
- COVERT ACTION (RANK S)
- SERVICE (RANK S)
- COOKING (RANK S)
- SEWING (RANK S)
- CLEANING (RANK S)
- ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)
- DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
- DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

- BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING
- CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

- DIVINE RESTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL)
- COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)
- FARSIGHT (RANK S)
- DEMAND DETECTION (RANK S)
- TEACHING (RANK S)
- MASSAGE (RANK S)
- DISCERNMENT (RANK S)
- MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)
- MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)
- MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK S)



■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT KING / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 175

■ TITLE: SWORD GURU

■ HP: 20260/20260 (+13440) (+100)

■ MP: 717/717 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 4252 (+640) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 4536 (+640) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1351 (640) (+100)

■ MAGIC: 532 (+100)

■ LUCK: 532 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD DAINSFLEIF (RANK S)

DREADNOUGHT LEGALUS (RANK S)

CRIMSON ROGALIA (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GLORY WITHIN MINE HANDS

(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK S)

AUTO HEALING (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

MATERIALIZATION

GREATER SLICING DAMAGE

RESISTANCE

GREATER DARK DAMAGE

RESISTANCE

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE

(UNIQUE SKILL)

ANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK S)

RIDING (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

TEACHING (RANK S)

VIGOR (RANK S)

FORTITUDE (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

HEAVY DRINKER (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DEMON SWORD DAINSFLEIF++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/DREADNOUGHT LEGALUS++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/CRIMSON ROGALIA++

SELF-TRANSCENDANCE/GODDESS'S RING++

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MEL (☐ BODY)

■ 17 ☐ / FEMALE / ANGEL / ☐ LKY ☐

■ LEVEL: ☐

■ TITLE: YOU ARE NO LONGER THE GODDESS.

■ HP: ☐/☐

■ MP: ☐/☐

■ STRE[□]: 1 (-)

■ ENDURANCE: 1 (-)

■ AGIL[□]: 1 (-)

■ MAGIC: 1 (-)

■ ☐[□]: 1 (-)

■ EQUIPMENT

VALK[□] MAIL HAS BEEN TAKEN AS AN OFFERING.

VALKYRIE HELM HAS BEEN TAKEN AS AN OFFERING.

GODDESS'S RING HAS BEEN ☐KEN AS AN OFFERING.

ENGAGEMENT RING HAS BEEN TAKEN AS AN OFFERING.

REINFORCED ET[□] GREAVES HAS BEEN TAKEN AS AN OFFERING.

■ ☐ KILLS

ALL SKILLS AND ???KILL POINTS HAVE BEEN TAKEN AS AN ???RING

■ PASSIVE ☐ ECTS

SUMMONING/ MAGIC SUP[□] (NO NEED FOR THAT)

CONCEALMENT (IS MEANINGLESS.

MEANINGLESSMEAN[□]LESSMEANINGLESS-)

■ RION CELSIUS

■ 14 Y/O / FEMALE / HUMAN / SWORD SAINT

■ LEVEL: 173

■ TITLE: BLACK COMET

■ HP: 6690/6690 (+4460)

■ MP: 4184/4184

■ STRENGTH: 2242

■ ENDURANCE: 1201 (+640)

■ AGILITY: 4381 (+640)

■ MAGIC: 3347 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2347

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD CALADBOLG (RANK S)

FAUX HOLY SWORD WILL (RANK A)

BLACK SWORD AKLAMA (RANK S) X 2

BLACK RECESS (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS OF THE DIVINE BEAST (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

RESIDUAL SLICE

(UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

PAINTING (RANK S)

EMPATHY (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

VIGOR (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK S)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

ABSOLUTE PURIFICATION

(UNIQUE SKILL)

DUAL WIELD (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT

(RANK S)

STRATAGEM (RANK S)

FORTITUDE (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ ALEX

■ 3 Y/O / MALE / VANARGAND

■ LEVEL: 173

■ TITLE: HEAT HAZE

■ HP: 17392/17392 (+11528) (+100)

■ MP: 2010/2010 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 3772 (+640) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 3279 (+640) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 3010 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 1776 (+100)

■ LUCK: 1568 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

LETHAL OPIATE SWORD

(RANK S)

GODDESS'S COLLAR

(RANK S)

■ SKILLS

SHADOW TRAVEL (UNIQUE SKILL)

CREEPING DARKNESS (UNIQUE SKILL)

IMITATOR (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

ACROBATICS (RANK S)

AUSCULTATION (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

SKY WALK (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK S)

MIND'S EYE (RANK S)

FORTITUDE (RANK S)

IRON WALL (RANK S)

COVERT ACTION (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION
(RANK S)



■ DAHAK

■ 162 Y/O / MALE / BLACK DRAGON
(EARTH DRAGON KING) / FARMER

■ LEVEL: 172

■ TITLE: EMPEROR GREENS

■ HP: 5629 (+100)

■ MP: 3764 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 3344 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 3198 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 1899 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 2371 (+100)

■ LUCK: 1320 (+640) (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (HUMAN FORM)

HOE OF MOTHER EARTH (RANK S)

WORK CLOTHES OF MOTHER EARTH
(RANK S)

BOOTS OF MOTHER EARTH (RANK S)

TOWEL OF MOTHER EARTH (RANK S)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B)

GODDESS'S COLLAR (RANK S)

■ SKILLS

GEMMATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

BLACK LOAM SCALES (UNIQUE SKILL)

GREEN MAGIC (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK F)

BREATH (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

AGRICULTURE (RANK S)

HORTICULTURE (RANK S)

CONSTRUCTION (RANK S)

CONVERSATION (RANK S)

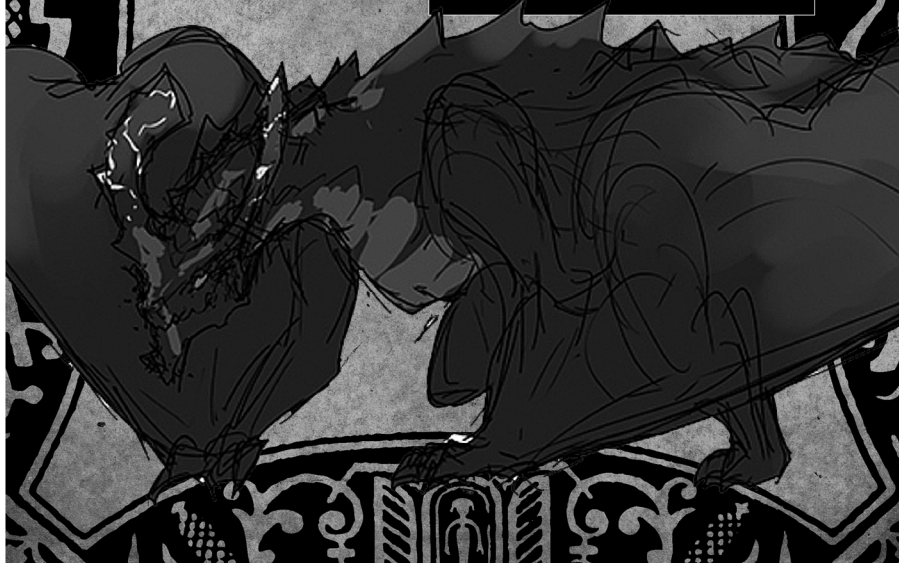
SUPER LUCK (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DARKNESS DRAGON KING

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ MDOFARAK

■ 63 Y/O / FEMALE / THREE-HEADED DRAGON (LIGHT DRAGON KING) / GUNNER

■ LEVEL: 172

■ TITLE: SNIPING PRINCESS

■ HP: 6251/6251 (+100)

■ MP: 4173/4173 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1491 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1301 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 3373 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 3846 (+640) (+100)

■ LUCK: 2766 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT (HUMAN FORM)

ELEMENTAL CLOAK (RANK S)

MONOGRAMMED LEATHER BOOTS (RANK A)

PORTABLE INFINITE CANDY BAG (RANK A)

■ EQUIPMENT (DRAGON FORM)

DRAGON SADDLE (RANK B) (DRAGON FORM)

GODDESS'S COLLAR (RANK S) (DRAGON FORM)

■ SKILLS

MULTI-ELEMENTAL CONSTITUTION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMPRESSED ERUPTION (UNIQUE SKILL)

AUREOLA BELL (UNIQUE SKILL)

BREATH (RANK S)

FARSIGHT (RANK S)

FLIGHT (RANK S)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK S)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK S)

FOCUS (RANK S)

SPEED READING (RANK S)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK S)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)

AGRICULTURE (RANK S)

GUSTATION (RANK S)

OLFACTION (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ SHUTOLA TRYCEN

■ 18 Y/O / FEMALE / SAGE / PUPPETMASTER

■ LEVEL: 169

■ TITLE: DOLL PRINCESS

■ HP: 960/960

■ MP: 3080/3080

■ STRENGTH: 364

■ ENDURANCE: 380

■ AGILITY: 1105

■ MAGIC: 3684 (+640)

■ LUCK: 2292

■ EQUIPMENT

GODDESS'S MAGI-THREADS (RANK S)

MONICA (RANK S)

GEORGIUS (RANK S)

ROYAL GUARD (RANK S) X10

GUARD (RANK A) X25

FAIRY DRESS II (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE II (RANK S)

GODDESS'S RING (RANK S)

SHOES OF THE SPIRITS (RANK A)

■ SKILLS

PERFECT MEMORY (UNIQUE SKILL)

RETRIBUTIVE PERSUASION (UNIQUE SKILL)

PUPPETRY (RANK S)

BLUE MAGIC (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK S)

NERVES OF STEEL (RANK S)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK S)

MILITARY TACTIC (RANK S)

STRATAGEM (RANK S)

MAGIC ATTACHMENT (RANK S)

MAGIC CONSERVATION (RANK S)

COMPANIONSHIP (RANK S)

NEGOTIATION (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

ACTING (RANK S)

CONVERSATION (RANK S)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK S)

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DOUBLE SKILL POINTS



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Black Summoner: Volume 12

by Doufu Mayoi

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Edited by Tess Nanavati

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